Thirty-Five Ghosts

Jan Lavrinovski

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First Drop

1955

The plane dropped through heat like it was sinking into a mouth. Metal skin popped and groaned, the stink of fuel and hot oil bleeding through the seams, mixing with sweat that had nowhere to go. Canvas packs were already darkening on their backs before the ramp even fell, men shifting their weight, boots planted wide, someone muttering, “Jesus, it’s like humpin’ Satan’s armpit.” When the ramp slammed down, the air rushed in thick and sour, heavy with rot and birdshit and something sweet that turned the stomach, and the noise hit next — rotors, engines, shouting, a thousand things all yelling at once without saying anything at all.

They stepped onto the tarmac at Bien Hoa and the heat climbed straight up their legs, through their groins, into their chests, like it was looking for a place to sit. Clay felt it there immediately, a pressure more than a burn, and stood still a moment too long until someone behind him shoved and said, “Move it, sarge, ain’t no fucking parade.” The ground shimmered, oil puddles rainbowing under the sun, spent shell casings crunching under boots. Off to the side, crates were stacked wrong, torn open, men in faded utilities yelling over each other, laughing too loud. Roosters ran loose between them, pecking at garbage, bold as thieves.

Clay adjusted his helmet strap and scanned without thinking, the way he always did, eyes moving on their own. That’s when he saw the boy. Barefoot, no shirt, ribs sharp as slats, standing near a fuel truck with a cigarette clenched between his teeth like he’d been born with it there. The boy raised his hand, maybe to wave, maybe to beg. The hand ended at the wrist, wrapped in dirty cloth, dark and stiff. He didn’t look at Clay’s face. He looked at the rifle.

“Hey,” someone said nearby, low. “Don’t stare. You’ll make him nervous.” Another voice followed, cheerful, wrong. “Kid’s probably got more body count than you, short-timer.” Laughter spilled out, thin and quick, already slick with sweat. The boy spat, missed the ground, wiped his mouth with his good hand, and turned away like they weren’t worth the time.

They formed up loose, half-assed, nobody sure who was supposed to be where. Orders came shouted, then repeated, then changed. Clay caught pieces — perimeter, staging, chow later — none of it sticking. He watched the boy disappear behind the truck, the roosters scattering, feathers floating slow in the heat. “Where’d his hand

go," someone asked, not expecting an answer. No one gave one. A truck backfired and a man flinched hard enough to curse himself.

Clay felt the strap bite into his chin and tightened it again, though it was already tight. He smelled the place filling him up, oil and rot and old water, and stood there breathing it in while the plane behind them screamed and lifted away, leaving nothing but heat and noise and ground that didn't feel like it belonged to anyone. "Welcome to the Nam," someone said, spitting. Clay didn't answer. His eyes went back to where the boy had been, already empty, the tarmac shining like it had never held anything at all.

The truck ride to Binh Loc broke whatever bones were still soft in them. Thirty-five men, red-faced and wordless, stacked on sandbags and ammo tins in the back of a deuce-and-a-half that screamed with every pothole and left their spines humming. Dust rose in orange clouds behind them, clung to hair, skin, lips. Manson wiped his glasses every ten minutes, gave up after twenty. "This isn't a road," Criggs muttered, biting down on a cigarette. "It's a goddamn suggestion." No one laughed. The dust tasted like rusted wire and teeth.

The village came out of the trees like something guilty — low and wide and built to disappear. Thatched huts, rusted corrugated roofs, one concrete skeleton of a structure in the middle like a cracked tooth. Clay stepped down first, boots sinking into mud that wasn't mud, exactly — some mix of sewage, rain, and trampled life. The dogs watched them arrive from under porches and broken carts, eyes glassy, ribs pushing at the skin, silent. Not a bark. Not even a growl. Just watching, unmoving.

Binh Loc had once been a French outpost, someone said. The bunkers still squatted around the north edge, pitted and piss-stained, vines growing through mortar holes. One bunker door had been nailed shut with bamboo slats. Something inside buzzed. Maybe flies. Maybe worse. Clay made a note in his book, then scratched it out — the map said a different layout entirely. Roads had shifted. Some weren't there at all. Whole houses marked as standing were now piles of char and ash.

Children watched from the shadows, silent as the dogs. Big eyes, bellies distended, arms like sticks. One boy had a rusted can lid tied to a string, dragging it behind him like it might catch something. He didn't look up when they passed. A girl pissed herself as they walked by, then sat back down in it like she'd done it before. "Friendly village, huh?" Harlow said. He grinned. It didn't reach his eyes.

They set up near a school that hadn't held a lesson in years. Chalk dust still on the floor, blackboard cracked down the middle like a broken tooth. Flies buzzed around

the corners, a goat skeleton twisted under a desk. Clay found the old woman in the far hut. She sat under a mosquito net, hands moving in slow prayer, eyes closed, lips barely parting. Her skin looked paper-thin and sunburnt into leather. On the wall behind her, the Virgin Mary watched with a smile that had faded into a smudge. When Clay stepped closer, she stopped praying, opened her eyes, and looked through him like he wasn't there.

No one touched anything that night. They ate out of cans. They pissed in ditches. Criggs joked about the dogs being VC scouts. Wilkins didn't speak at all. Clay looked at the map again, turning it this way and that, frowning. "This place shouldn't be here," he said. "Not like this." But the village didn't hear him. The village was listening to something else.

The first patrol moved out before dawn, before the roosters, before the sun. The jungle coughed them in slow, single file, wet boots sliding in mud that smelled like meat gone bad. Sweat had already soaked through their undershirts by the time they cleared the first rice paddy. There wasn't a breeze. The heat hung like wet wool. Insects whispered from the trees in rhythms that made no sense, rising and falling like warnings in a language none of them spoke. No one said a goddamn thing. The silence pressed on them. Not the peaceful kind. The kind that listens back.

Clay took point. Wilkins followed, eyes drifting too much. Harlow walked third, chewing on a toothpick like it owed him something. Manson trailed near the rear, rifle low, muttering quietly. They stepped over a half-rotted fence, through jungle thickets with elephant grass taller than their helmets. The trees here didn't arch overhead — they leaned. As if pushing down. Closing in. Criggs whispered, "They don't want us here." He wasn't smiling.

Three clicks in, Harlow froze mid-step. Held up his fist. They halted. Clay crouched, scanned, slow. Harlow's eyes were locked on a tree ahead — broad, dark trunk, roots like twisted legs. "Saw movement," Harlow whispered. "Right there. Fuckin' saw it." They watched. Waited. Nothing. Then birds lifted off somewhere behind them in a burst. No gunfire. Just wings. Too many of them.

Clay inched forward, careful, ears working harder than his feet. Nothing moved. No breeze. No rustle. Just heat and breath and the ticking of sweat down the spine. The moment stretched like wire, then snapped. "Squirrel, maybe," Harlow said. But his eyes stayed on the tree. Manson said, "No squirrels here, man. You seen any squirrels?" No one answered.

They circled back toward the village by noon. Their shirts stuck to their backs like skin trying to peel away. Clay called it short. Something about the dirt felt wrong — prints that didn't match boots, little divots with claw marks maybe, but maybe not. He didn't write it down.

Back in Binh Loc, they tried to ask the villagers if anyone had been near the tree line. Clay showed the map again, pointed. The old woman turned her face to the floor. A boy spat in the dirt and walked away. The others just stared, said nothing. Same faces, same silence. Harlow kicked a rusted bucket. It rattled down the path and stopped upright. "Whole goddamn village plays dumb," he muttered. "They know something. They fucking know."

No one corrected him. Clay wiped his hands on his trousers and looked out at the trees again. The branches hadn't moved since they left. Not even once.

The wail came just before midnight. Thin and sharp, like something snapping in the dark. It didn't last long. Most of the platoon was already half-asleep on their cots or rolled in ponchos under the broken eaves of the schoolhouse. Clay sat up, boots still on, eyes open before his name was even called. "Sarge," the medic said at the door, not stepping inside. "Got a situation. Civilian." That was all.

They followed the noise through the narrow alleys between huts, stepping over chicken bones, past fires burned down to red lumps. The old woman from earlier was there, kneeling in the doorway of a small shack, hands open in her lap. Inside, the mother sat like stone, naked from the waist up, her skin slick with sweat and ash. The baby lay across her thighs, still as anything. No crying. No movement. Just a little open mouth and eyes that hadn't learned to focus. Clay couldn't tell if the child was a girl or a boy.

The medic checked for a pulse, listened, shook his head. "Too hot," he said. "Shit like this happens. No fans, no air, baby can't breathe. Can't cool down. Hell, happens back home too." He said it flat, no real emotion, already tired of the look on Clay's face. "Want me to file something?" Clay shook his head. "No one's asking."

Wilkins didn't say a word. He stood at the edge of the room, helmet off, watching the mother rock slightly, almost as if she'd already forgotten the baby was in her arms. The old woman began to hum, low, guttural. Criggs lit a cigarette outside and coughed like he was spitting something out of his lungs. "Fuck this place," he muttered. No one replied.

Later, back at the edge of the compound, Wilkins sat with his boots in the dirt, legs pulled up like a kid watching clouds. He had a stick in one hand, and he was dragging it gently through the earth, over and over, no pattern at first. Then lines. A curve. Another. Slowly, the shape of a face emerged. Eyes, wide and flat. A mouth open just a little. Hair drawn in ridges of mud and dust. He smiled at it.

"Who's that?" Manson asked, walking past. Wilkins didn't look up. "She was beautiful," he said softly. "Didn't cry once." Manson watched the drawing until wind took it in pieces. Wilkins kept tracing even after it was gone. Like he was waiting for the shape to return.

The Stirring

The firefight broke loose near a hamlet west of Phuoc Vinh, where the trees closed in around the trail so tight it felt like walking through the inside of a throat. The air was soup-thick and yellow with dust, stirred by chopper blades hours earlier that had gone somewhere else, somewhere better. Clay's platoon had been humping all day, packs slumping, boots eating mud, and the smell of old water sitting in their nostrils like mildew in cloth. When the first shot cracked, sharp and high like a whip, nobody moved for half a second. Then the trees opened up with fire.

Clay hit the dirt behind a half-collapsed berm, heart pounding slow and hard, like it wanted out. "Contact, front!" someone screamed — maybe Wilkins, maybe the radioman who'd barely learned names. Clay counted the heads in the mud, spotted Harlow laying suppressive rounds from behind a termite mound, heard Manson cussing like a schoolteacher reading from the wrong book. The gunfire was close — too close — but it wasn't organized. It sounded like panic from both sides, bullets shredding leaves, chewing bark, cracking too near the bone.

Then came the scream. Not the kind made from pain. The other kind — the one that ends short, like a rope pulling tight.

"Man down! We got one down, fuck!" Criggs was shouting now, pointing to the thicket just ahead where smoke curled through vines and heat shimmered off old ammo casings. Clay slid over the ground, low, rifle tight, eyes scanning for movement. That's when he saw the body — laid out like a dropped sack, blood bubbling from the chest in thick bursts. It was Jacobs, the new guy, the one who called everyone sir by mistake. Shot clean through the ribs. Exit wound looked like someone had punched a fist out from inside his back.

“Goddamn it,” Clay hissed, already reaching for his canteen, not knowing why.

“Where’s the shooter?” Harlow barked. “Anyone see the fucking shooter?”

“Wasn’t Charlie!” Wilkins was pale, pointing back. “That came from behind, man — that was *us*! That was from our side!”

Buckshot Guerrero was already there, dragging the body out with both hands, blood soaking his sleeves, smearing across his flak. “Come on, man, come on, you ain’t done, you just tripped, that’s all, just slipped, fuckin’ tree root—” He was weeping as he talked, not even trying to hide it. “Fuckin’ tree root, man. You ain’t done.”

“Doc!” Clay shouted. “Get over here now!”

But Jacobs was gone. His eyes were open, teeth bared in a smile that wasn’t a smile anymore. The medic checked his pulse anyway, even tried chest compressions with one hand, then just stopped and sat back hard on his heels. “Through-and-through,” he muttered. “Too much red. Nothing left to squeeze.”

Guerrero stayed with the body while the others held the perimeter. Manson kept looking over his shoulder, rifle trained on the trail behind them. “We shot our own,” he said. “We fucking shot our own.” Criggs stood up too fast, swung his M16 back toward the treeline. “We *did not*, shut the fuck up. You don’t *know* what you heard.” His face was white, angry-white. “Sound bounces. Could’ve been Charlie behind a tree. Could’ve been deflected.”

Wilkins snorted. “Deflected through the guy’s chest? Fuck you, Criggs.”

Harlow said nothing, just stared at the blood pooling in the dirt like it might form a shape if he looked long enough.

Clay didn’t write it down. He opened his little green notebook, looked at the page for a long minute, then flipped it shut again. No time. No point. He just tore the top corner off and let it fall. The firefight ended the way it started — no clear start, no clear end. Just noise, then wind again. The jungle swallowed its echoes.

When they lifted Jacobs' body onto the poncho, Guerrero walked behind it, mumbling something to himself, over and over. Wilkins leaned close and listened. “What’s he saying?”

“He’s praying,” Manson said. “Or trying to. But it ain’t in English.”

They buried Jacobs beside a termite hill near the edge of the trail. Clay didn't mark the map. He didn't say anything during the eulogy. Because there wasn't one. They kept walking. There was still daylight left. Still miles to go. Still more of them to lose.

The cigarettes came first. Rolled too tight, burned too fast. Local weed, rough and dry, hidden inside Lucky Strike packs or wrapped in Bible pages when they ran out of paper. No one said anything at first. It wasn't about escape — it was just something to do while sitting in the dark waiting for the claymores to go off. Clay caught Manson passing one to Criggs behind the comm shack one night, both of them leaning on their heels, laughing about a monkey they'd seen fall out of a tree earlier that day. "It's jungle tobacco, sarge," Manson said. "War issue." Criggs exhaled slow, smiled like he was somewhere else. "Better than salt pills."

Wilkins took to it faster than the others, rolled his own, always smoked alone. Said it kept the noise down in his head. "Smells like roaches," Harlow muttered once. Wilkins just smiled. "You ever been a roach?" he said. "They see things down low. Where the real stuff crawls." He didn't blink when he spoke. Clay watched him close for a while after that, but nothing came of it. Not then.

Then came the morphine. One of the medics had a stash, lifted from a busted-up aid station outside Vung Tau. At first it was for pain — twisted ankles, infected cuts, heat blisters too deep to walk on. But lines blurred fast. One shot at night turned into one before patrol, one before breakfast, one because the sun was hitting wrong. Criggs passed out during a briefing, half a grin frozen on his face. Harlow stood over him for twenty minutes, didn't say a word.

Wilkins didn't stop at morphine. He found something stronger, stolen from a vet compound: Taren, Soviet-issue anticholinergic tablets packed six to a red pencil-case capsule. He swallowed all six at once. The effects hit hard—delirium creeping in after twenty minutes, dry mouth, blurred vision, the jungle spinning into vivid hallucinations. He lay flat on his back and stared into the jungle canopy like it was the night sky, lost in a terrifying, disorienting trip that blurred reality for hours. He didn't speak for hours. When he finally did, his voice was soft, distant. "Trees are upside down," he said. "The roots are in the clouds. We're just walking on their veins."

His skin went pale fast after that. Translucent, almost. Veins visible like pencil lines under the surface. When he stood near the firelight, the light passed through him just a little. Manson said he looked like wax. Guerrero started calling him "Ghost." Wilkins didn't seem to mind.

No one stopped him. There were no rules anymore. Just days and heat and patrols and rot. The air was too thick for rules.

Clay wrote down nothing about the drugs. He watched. He remembered. But the book stayed closed. “They need it,” Harlow said once, low and quiet, looking out over the rice paddies. “Hell, I need it. I just don’t take it yet.” He flicked a cigarette into the mud. “But it’s coming. You’ll see. Jungle eats the clean ones first.”

That night, Wilkins walked barefoot through the fireflies, hands dripping something that wasn’t blood but wasn’t water either. He smiled at nothing and whispered to someone who wasn’t there. No one asked what he saw. They were starting to see it too.

They were told the village was hot. That’s all. No grid error, no maybe, no double-check. Just a name passed down the line and a gesture with a thumb toward the trees. The place sat in a shallow basin, huts pressed together like they were trying to keep warm, smoke from cooking fires rising straight up into a sky that didn’t care. Clay felt it go wrong the moment they stepped off the trail — no dogs, no noise, too clean. “Feels hinky,” Manson said, low. Criggs spat and chambered a round. “Everything feels hinky till it don’t.”

The first hut went up fast. Dry thatch, old bamboo, flame licking through it like it had been waiting. Someone threw a Zippo in through the door and the fire bloomed bright and greedy. A woman screamed from inside another hut and ran out clutching a pot, tripped, vanished into smoke. Harlow shouted something about movement. Someone else shouted “VC!” and that was enough. Orders blurred. Fire spread. Clay tried to call it back, voice lost in crackle and heat. “Hold! Hold your fucking—” Too late.

They torched the whole place in minutes. M79 rounds thumped into roofs, blowing them apart in bursts of fire and straw. Chickens ran burning through the dirt, wings flapping soundlessly. A man crawled out from under a hut with his back on fire and fell face-first into the mud. Criggs stood in the open, laughing hard, doubled over, slapping his thigh. “Look at ‘em run!” he shouted. “Holy shit, look at ‘em go!” His face was split wide with it, eyes wet, breath hitching between laughs like he might choke.

“Jesus Christ, shut him up,” Manson muttered, firing into the tree line just to do something.

Wilkins hadn’t fired at all. He stood near the edge of the village, rifle hanging loose, staring into the smoke as it thickened and rolled. The flames cast shadows that

stretched wrong, bending back on themselves. In the smoke, faces formed — not clear, not solid, but there all the same. Old men, women, children, mouths open like they were calling through water. Wilkins lifted a hand slowly, palm out. “I see you,” he said softly. “Yeah. I see.”

Clay grabbed his shoulder. “Wilkins. Mount up. Now.”

Wilkins turned his head just enough to look at Clay, eyes glassy, shining. “They’re still here,” he said. “Didn’t go anywhere. Fire don’t scare ‘em.” He turned back to the smoke and started talking, low and steady, like calming a horse. Words slipped out that didn’t sound like English, didn’t sound like anything Clay knew. His tone was gentle. Almost respectful.

The fire died down as quick as it had risen, leaving black ribs of huts and a smell that stuck in the throat. No bodies. No weapons. No spent casings except theirs. The village had been empty — abandoned days, maybe weeks earlier. Clay figured it out too late. He stood in the ash with his helmet off and said nothing.

Criggs wiped his eyes, still grinning. “Man,” he said, breathless. “That was something.”

Wilkins knelt and traced shapes in the soot with his finger, nodding as if someone were answering him. The smoke drifted off into the trees, carrying the last of the faces with it. Only Wilkins watched them go.

The nights stretched like skin pulled too tight over bone. Time didn’t pass — it thickened. Hours bled into each other without the dignity of a beginning or end. After the village burned, the platoon moved camp three clicks west, set up in a hollow between two ridgelines near a stream that ran red with clay. No one spoke of the fire. The silence that followed it wasn’t shame, not exactly. It was something slower. Like forgetting on purpose.

The trees no longer moved. Not even in wind. When breeze came through — and it still did, sometimes — it only stirred the grass. The canopies stayed still. Clay noticed it first, though he didn’t say anything. Just watched them at dusk, their limbs stiff, leaves rigid like they were waiting for something to pass before they moved again. That first night in the hollow, a branch creaked behind the comm tent. Loud. Not wind. Not an animal. Just a dry wooden groan, long and slow, like a door swinging open in an empty house. It didn’t stop until morning.

Guerrero claimed it was a monkey. Criggs said monkeys don't creak. "You ever heard a fuckin' monkey creak, Guerrero? Jesus." Guerrero spat into the fire and said nothing else. Harlow loaded his magazine by touch, head down, face unreadable.

Around midnight, Wilkins stood up from his cot without a word and walked out into the dark. Clay followed him half a click, boots soft in the moss. Found him kneeling near a tree, eyes closed, whispering.

"Who are you talking to?" Clay asked.

"They're out here," Wilkins murmured. "Little ones. The ones who listen."

Clay opened his mouth, then closed it. Walked back without a sound.

The next night it happened. No one was asleep, not really. Not by then. They'd gotten used to sleeping with eyes cracked and rifles cocked. Manson was on watch when it came — a voice, small and sharp, drifting through the brush from nowhere.

"Where's my father?" it asked. In perfect, crisp English. Not screamed. Not scared. Just spoken.

Manson stood up, turned toward the treeline, blinking fast. "What the fuck was that?"

They all heard it. Criggs sat bolt upright, hand on his weapon. Harlow whispered, "Jesus Christ." Wilkins just smiled.

The voice came again. "Where's my father? Where did you send him?"

No movement in the brush. No shapes. Just leaves and silence. The fire popped once, loud in the hush. Then nothing.

They swept the area the next morning. Found nothing. No footprints. No sign of passage. Just the creek, and the trees still stiff, and one child's flip-flop half-buried in mud under a banyan root. No wear on the sole. No bite marks. Fresh.

Clay didn't report it. The radio had gone to static anyway, stuck humming even when shut off. That night, he laid awake under the tarp, staring at the canopy that refused to sway. He thought he saw something up there once. But when he looked again, there was only stillness. Only the sound of trees creaking like old doors that no longer led anywhere.

The Fire Road

Manson said it like it was nothing. They were sitting along the fire road just before dusk, the dirt still warm enough to bleed heat through their boots, smoke hanging low because the air refused to lift it. He was cleaning his rifle slow, methodical, hands steady for once. “She’s here,” he said, not looking up. Harlow snorted. Criggs kept chewing on a strip of jerky. Clay glanced over but didn’t interrupt. Manson worked the bolt, wiped it clean, and added, “My fiancée. From back home. I keep seeing her between the trees.”

“Bullshit,” Criggs said. “You been hittin’ the monkey water again?”

Manson shook his head. “Haven’t touched it in two days.” He finally looked up then, eyes bloodshot but clear. “She’s wearing the same yellow dress she wore when she left. I hear her walking when it rains. She calls my name like she used to. Same voice. Same way she drags the ‘s’.” He smiled, small and tired. “She’s waiting for me.”

No one laughed. Wilkins tilted his head like he was listening for something else entirely. “Yellow’s a good color,” he said. “Means the sun still wants you.”

That night, Manson didn’t take his post. He just stood up from his cot sometime after midnight, slung his rifle, and walked straight into the jungle without a word. Clay noticed the absence ten minutes later. By the time they reached the treeline, there was nothing to follow — no sound, no broken brush, no prints that made sense. The jungle had closed behind him like water.

They waited. Guerrero paced. Criggs kept checking his watch even though it hadn’t worked since ‘61. Harlow leaned against a tree, arms folded, eyes empty. “He’s dead,” Criggs said finally. “You don’t walk off like that and come back.”

Manson came back just before dawn. Walked out of the brush slow, shoulders slumped, boots heavy. His uniform was soaked through, dark with blood from the knees down, sleeves stiff and blackened. His hands were red to the wrists. Not shaking. Not wounded. Just wet. He dropped his rifle on the ground and sat down hard, breathing through his mouth like he’d run a long way.

“Where the fuck you been?” Guerrero shouted.

Manson didn’t answer. The medic checked him anyway. No cuts. No punctures. No tears in the fabric that explained the blood. It wasn’t all his — that much was clear.

Wilkins knelt nearby, sniffed the air, nodded to himself. “She found him,” he whispered.

Clay crouched in front of Manson. “You hurt?” Manson shook his head. “You see anyone?” Another shake. Clay waited. Manson stared past him, into the trees, eyes unfocused. “She’s not mad anymore,” he said quietly. “That’s all.”

He wouldn’t say where he’d gone. Wouldn’t say whose blood it was. He washed his hands in the creek until the water ran pink, then clear, then pink again. By sunrise, the jungle had swallowed whatever answers he might have brought back with him, and the fire road lay ahead like a scar that never healed.

The Mekong twisted below them like something alive — not just water, but muscle, flexing through mud and vine and flooded rice fields that stretched so wide they seemed to have no edge. The patrol boat was rusted along the hull, boards loose underfoot, engine coughing every few minutes like it was remembering how to die. The platoon rode in silence, boots planted wide, rifles across laps, watching the shore for shapes that didn’t belong. Clay stood near the front, one hand resting on the radio case, the other tracing a sweat trail down his neck. The sun didn’t burn so much as press, a hand on the back of the head, pushing everyone down.

The jungle here was thicker, hung lower over the riverbanks, its roots half-submerged, arms draped like it was waiting for something to float too close. “Looks like it wants to eat us,” Guerrero muttered. Harlow just lit a cigarette, passed one to Criggs without speaking. Even the birds were quiet. The jungle breathed in layers. At the top, wide canopies of dipterocarp trees spread like umbrellas, their massive limbs soaked in moss and rain, laced with vines thick as a man's wrist. Below them, the mid-tier was a war of strangler figs and wild palms, their fan-shaped leaves dripping steady water from the morning mist. Ferns carpeted the ground, dense and spongy, bending with every footfall. Red and yellow orchids clung to tree trunks, blooming in strange, open mouths. Bamboo thickets cracked and swayed without wind, sometimes from monkeys unseen, sometimes from nothing at all.

Cicadas screamed like electric wires — sharp, constant, rising and falling as if the jungle had lungs. Somewhere deeper, a macaque howled and then went silent. Large butterflies drifted like torn fabric through shafts of green light, flashing blue, orange, black. Tiny frogs the size of bullets sat unmoving on leaves slick with dew, and fire ants moved in long, silent rivers across fallen logs. Leeches clung to everything that bled heat. A hornbill flapped overhead, wings heavy, vanishing into mist. Something hissed from the water — maybe a lizard, maybe not.

The jungle didn't hide. It performed. It seethed with color and rot and birth, full of buzzing wings, wet bark, and the soft thump of unseen things leaping just out of view. Roots clawed at the banks like ribs of buried giants, and every leaf shimmered with the slick oil of endless rain. Nothing here was still. Not truly. Not even the stones.

That's when they saw it — a flash of movement on the shore, high up on the embankment, too smooth for a man, too fast for a monkey. It paused for just a moment, watching them from behind the ferns. Gold eyes. Black stripes. No sound. A tiger. Full-grown. Silent as a shadow.

"Holy shit," whispered Weiss, leaning over the port side. "Thing's the size of a fuckin' jeep."

Then it was gone, back into the trees without rustling a single branch. Clay kept his face flat, but his jaw clenched. "Eyes open," he said. "Jungle's talking again."

That night they camped near the river bend, three claymores laid in a triangle, fire low and small, perimeter tight. No one talked much. The tiger stayed in the back of their minds like a memory no one wanted to own. Manson tied his boots tighter than usual. Guerrero slept with his rifle across his chest and a knife in hand.

Weiss had third watch.

They found what was left of him just after dawn. One leg, torn off at the hip, dragged halfway across the trail like it had been dropped mid-stride. The bone was visible at the end — not chewed, not splintered, just snapped clean, like someone had bent him backward till it gave. His boot was still on. Laces tight.

There was blood in the leaves, but not enough. No drag marks. No screams during the night. No one had heard a thing.

The medic threw up. Criggs backed away, blinking fast. Harlow picked up the leg and wrapped it in a poncho like it was made of glass. “Send it back?” someone asked. “To who?” someone else said. “His mom? With a note that says sorry, we lost the rest?”

Clay said nothing. He looked into the trees, listening. He knew better than to say it was a tiger. He knew when nature made noise, and when something else borrowed its shape.

No one slept for the next two nights. Wilkins poured salt in a ring around his cot. Criggs scratched his arms till they bled. Manson stayed awake sharpening a stick for no reason. Even the insects seemed to hold their breath.

They found the tunnel by accident, the way most bad things showed up now — by someone almost stepping into it. Guerrero’s boot punched through a mat of leaves and sank to the ankle, and when he yanked it free the ground sighed, a soft hollow sound that made everyone freeze. Clay knelt, brushed away the leaves with his hand. A hole stared back at them, round and dark, rimmed with packed clay smoothed by use. The air that breathed out of it was cold enough to prickle the skin. “Charlie,” Harlow said. Wilkins laughed, a light sound that didn’t fit. “Maybe,” he said. “Or maybe something older that learned their tricks.”

Before Clay could assign anyone, Wilkins was already stripping off his pack. He slung his rifle across his back, checked the pistol at his hip, and crouched at the mouth of the tunnel like a man greeting a doorway. “You’re not on the list,” Clay said sharply. Wilkins looked back over his shoulder, eyes bright, skin pale and shining like wax. “I hear music down there,” he said. “You don’t send the deaf guy when there’s music.” Then, without waiting, he slipped inside.

He went down humming. Not loud, not confident — a thin, tuneless song that wavered as it dropped into the earth. The sound crawled back up to them, bent and wrong, echoing in ways it shouldn’t. Criggs swore under his breath. “That fucker’s gonna get us all killed.” Clay lay flat and listened, counting heartbeats, fingers digging

into the dirt. The humming didn't stop. It moved farther away, then closer, then seemed to come from everywhere at once.

Minutes passed. Sweat rolled into Clay's eyes. The jungle leaned in, listening.

Then Wilkins came back. He emerged slow, boots scraping, shoulders hunched as if the tunnel had grown smaller behind him. His face was calm, almost pleased. "It goes deeper than it should," he said, brushing dirt from his knees. "And it turns without turning."

"What did you see?" Manson asked. His voice cracked on the last word.

Wilkins didn't answer right away. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a shard of glass, edges smoothed, surface clean enough to catch the light. "This," he said, holding it up. It was a mirror. Not a military signal mirror, not cracked, not fogged. Perfectly clean. No dust clung to it. No scratches. It reflected the jungle sharp and clear.

Wilkins looked into it and smiled.

The reflection smiled back — but not at the same time. The mirror's grin came a heartbeat late, wider, wrong around the eyes. Wilkins tilted his head. The reflection didn't. "He looks better down there," Wilkins said softly. "More put together." He slipped the mirror back into his pocket like a keepsake.

Clay stared at the tunnel mouth. "We collapse it," he said. No one argued. They packed the hole with charges and blew it shut, the ground jumping under them, dirt raining down. When the dust cleared, the jungle looked unchanged, as if nothing had ever been there at all.

That night, Wilkins sat alone, polishing the mirror with the edge of his sleeve, humming the same thin song. When Clay passed by, Wilkins glanced up and said, "Don't worry. It knows where we are now."

The temple stood on a low hill, ringed by cracked stone lions and a fence of carved teak that had long since surrendered to moss and vine. Clay's orders were clear: sweep and clear, report any contact, confirm VC presence or activity. But the place didn't look like it had held people in years. The prayer bells were still hanging, unmoved by wind, and the air smelled like old paper and dried flowers. Someone had lit incense not long ago — the scent clung in the shaded corners of the nave, sweet and bitter, curling up toward rafters blackened by time, not fire.

The platoon moved through in silence, boots soft against tile worn smooth by barefoot monks long gone. No signs of weapons, no caches, no dugouts or tripwires. Just dust, pigeons, and the long-ago hush of chanting that still seemed to hang in the air. Manson ran a hand over a broken statue near the altar — the face missing, arms still folded in prayer. “Feels wrong,” he muttered. “Like someone’s watching, but they forgot how to blink.”

Clay found a small antechamber behind the altar, a narrow stone room with faded murals along the walls — Bodhisattvas with peeling gold, scenes of tigers walking on lotus leaves, monks dreaming their own deaths. He sat down there, alone, away from the others. The walls were soft with age, layered in soot and the smoke of generations. He pulled a stub of charcoal from his pack — meant for marking coordinates, not memory — and began to write.

Not orders. Not notes. A poem. Four lines, no rhyme, just the rhythm of things that had no place to go.

This is the place we will vanish.
No one will lift our bones.
The jungle has no use for names.
Only the sound we make when we die.

He looked at the words for a long time, not knowing why he’d written them. Then he noticed the ants.

A column of them, black and patient, marching across the floor like they owned it. They moved around his boot and into a crack near the base of the altar, carrying something pale and small between them. He leaned closer, squinted. It was a tooth. Human. No root. Clean, like it had been boiled. One ant dragged it by the hollow. Another pushed from behind.

Clay watched them disappear into the gap, vanishing one by one until the crack swallowed the last of them and there was only stone again.

He stood and brushed the soot from his hands. The others were already moving out. Harlow was calling for him, voice echoing through the halls. Clay looked at the poem one last time. The charcoal had smudged already, softened by the thick air, but the words still held.

Outside, the jungle sounded louder than before. Like it was reading the walls.

The radio hadn’t worked right in months — static most days, bursts of Vietnamese chatter some nights, or sometimes just that soft humming sound that set everyone’s teeth on edge. Guerrero was on rotation that evening, crouched under the poncho rig with the handset in one hand and a half-eaten cracker in the other when the signal cut through. Clean. No fuzz. A voice, unmistakable. “Fireteam Lima, this is Jacobs. Repeat, this is Jacobs. Coordinates incoming. Grid 32-Alpha by Tango-7. Over.”

The cracker dropped from Guerrero’s hand. He didn’t blink. His thumb hovered over the transmit switch but didn’t press. Manson, close by, froze mid-step. Criggs turned sharply, eyes narrow. “Say that again,” Manson whispered. “Who?”

Guerrero didn’t answer. Just played the tape again from the small reel-to-reel they’d rigged to record transmissions. The voice was soft, calm, as if the speaker had never died with his lungs full of blood in Criggs’s arms. “This is Jacobs. Grid 32-Alpha by Tango-7. Awaiting confirmation. Over.”

They gathered around the radio as if it were a fire. Wilkins nodded slowly, like he’d expected it all along. “He's been trying to reach us,” he murmured. “Just needed the right signal to ride in on.”

“No way,” Harlow muttered. “No fuckin’ way. He was zipped and flown two years ago.”

Clay said nothing. He looked at the map. Grid 32-Alpha didn’t exist. The map ended before it. Tango-7 was dense jungle, uncharted, maybe bombed once in ’65 but never cleared. The terrain there was swamp and fog, no roads, no villages, just green. He folded the map slowly, ran his thumb along the spine.

“I’ll go,” Guerrero said. Everyone turned to him.

Clay opened his mouth, closed it. “Buckshot—”

“I’ll go,” Guerrero repeated. “He was my friend. We left him.”

No one tried to stop him. They outfitted him light — one rucksack, two canteens, a flashlight, machete, no radio. The jungle always killed radios first anyway. Clay gave him a flare. “Pop it if you find anything,” he said. Guerrero nodded, face tight, eyes far.

He left at dawn.

The first night passed in silence. The second night, they heard something howling in the distance — not an animal. Not a man. The third day brought rain, and with it, unease that crawled up from the roots. No word. No flare. Just mist curling through the canopy like it was hunting something.

On the fourth morning, he came back.

He stumbled out of the treeline before anyone saw him. Clay found him kneeling in the mud near the perimeter wire, head down, hands open like he'd dropped something and couldn't remember what. His uniform was shredded, soaked, stained with something that wasn't blood but left a dark sheen on his skin. His eyes were wide, unblinking.

They carried him into the shade. The medic checked for wounds. There were none.

"Buckshot," Clay said, kneeling beside him. "Talk to me. What did you see?"

Guerrero opened his mouth. No words came. Just a long, thin sound, barely more than breath. Then he closed his eyes and slept for twenty hours straight. When he woke, he stared at the ceiling of the tent and whispered, "He's not dead. Just deeper. Just farther than we can walk." Then he turned his head and wouldn't speak again. Not about that. Not about anything.

The radio went dead that same evening. Static only. Clay pressed the handset against his ear long after the others had gone to sleep, waiting for Jacobs to come back.

Smell of Copper

They were ordered to hold Hill 162 by dusk. No one said why. No one ever did. It rose out of the red clay like a blister, bare at the top but ringed with thick elephant grass and stunted trees that leaned away from the peak as if they knew something the men didn't. The fog came in heavy before noon, soaked everything — boots, rifles, cigarettes, maps. Rain followed close behind, warm and constant, turning the ground to soup. By the time the platoon started up the incline, they were already coated in mud to their thighs, the clay sucking at their steps with a noise that sounded disturbingly like breath.

"Fuck this hill," Criggs growled, trying to free his boot from a patch of glue-thick mire. "What are we even holding? The goddamn fog?"

“Command says it’s strategic,” Manson said, eyes up the slope. “Looks like a fuckin’ anthill to me.”

“No ants in hell,” Wilkins added, walking sideways to keep from sinking. “Just the ones that already burned.”

The climb was slow, miserable, every step forward met by a slide half that length backward. By mid-afternoon, their legs burned and their rifles were caked in rust-colored sludge. Clay moved up front, leading without talking, his helmet strap tight against his jaw. He scanned the tree line with every few steps, heart ticking at a different rhythm than his feet. The silence felt wrong — not the peaceful kind, but the held-breath kind, the kind that waits with a hand behind its back.

The grass ahead was waist-high, slick with dew, motionless.

Suddenly four shapes rose from it — fluid, fast. Vietcong. Rifles already up.

Crack-crack. One fired before he was even standing, the round going wide. Another shouted something in Vietnamese, unintelligible through the air. The third was still lifting his barrel when a platoon member dropped to a knee and opened up with the M60 — the first burst caught one VC across the chest, opening it like wet canvas, ribs splitting in different directions, body thrown back and limp before it hit the ground.

The second VC spun as bullets tore through his left arm and into his throat. He tried to run, clutching his neck, but blood poured between his fingers. He collapsed, feet twitching.

Wilkins shot the third clean through the face — jaw gone, back of the skull flaring open like a cracked egg. The man staggered forward two steps on ruined legs before folding sideways into the clay.

Manson dropped the fourth. Three quick shots to the chest. The man fell on his rifle, coughing red, legs curling under him like a child trying to sleep. One breath. Then stillness.

None of it lasted more than ten seconds.

Silence dropped fast and full. Just steam rising from the grass. The red soil drank what it could. The rest stayed in puddles.

Then came the crack.

Short. Sharp. So clean it seemed to divide the air itself. Clay turned just in time to see the top half of Wilcox's skull pop open like a kicked watermelon. The man's body spun once, legs folding beneath him in the clay, and his helmet flew backward down the hill. His face was still turned toward the rest of them, one eye perfectly intact, the other socket black and steaming. Part of his brain slid from the cheek like it had tried to escape, then stuck there in a pink-gray clot.

"Sniper!" Harlow shouted, already diving down. "High right! Tree line!"

They scattered, slamming into the mud wherever cover offered — stumps, depressions, the dead weight of the hill itself. Return fire lit up the brush, but there was no sign of movement. Just fog, and rain, and that red clay turning darker with every minute.

Wilkins crawled forward on his elbows, whispering as he moved, eyes fixed on something no one else saw. "He's still watching," he muttered. "The one who pulled the trigger. He's still watching Wilcox. Not us. Just Wilcox."

Criggs crouched low beside the corpse, his hand on the man's collar. "Jesus," he whispered. "He didn't even twitch."

"No time to twitch," Manson said, voice clipped. "Gone before the sound got here."

Clay lay flat, biting the inside of his cheek, tasting copper and rot. He scanned the horizon, found nothing. No glint. No flash. Just trees standing silent, fog curling around them like gauze around broken teeth.

Wilcox's face was still half there. One eye staring. The brain slipping down, caught in the fold of his flak vest like it had nowhere else to go.

They didn't move him. Couldn't. The ground was too soft, the sniper too patient. So they waited, soaked in blood and rain, pinned by one unseen eye, while the hill slowly swallowed their boots.

They held the hill through the night, fog thick enough to chew, rain ticking on helmets like slow fingers. No one tried to dig in — the mud filled holes faster than hands could clear them. Instead they squatted, lay, leaned, wherever the slope allowed, bodies pressed into red clay that stained everything it touched. Wilcox lay where he'd fallen, face half-buried now, the eye finally closed by mud. No one covered him. No one could reach him without standing up.

Criggs sat with his back to a tree stump, boot propped on his knee, knife working steady at the heel. The sound was small but constant — scrape, pause, scrape — lost under the rain but close enough to notice if you were listening for it. Clay watched him for a while before speaking. “What’re you doing?” he asked, voice low.

Criggs didn’t look up. “Keeping count.” He turned the boot slightly, showed the heel. Short vertical lines, uneven, cut deep into the rubber. More than a dozen. Maybe more. “Each one’s a soul,” he said. “Notches for the hill. Hill’s hungry.” He smiled without humor and went back to carving. “When it fills up, maybe it lets us go.”

“Bullshit,” Harlow muttered from nearby, but he didn’t sound convinced.

Harlow lay on his back under a poncho stretched between two roots, helmet tilted over his eyes. His hands were inside his shirt, fingers curled around something heavy. Clay moved closer, crouched. “You good?” Harlow nodded once. “Yeah. They like it warm.” He shifted slightly and a dull clink answered from his chest.

“Grenades?” Clay asked.

Harlow lifted the edge of his shirt just enough to show the round shapes pressed against his ribs. Pins still in. “They talk less when they’re close,” he said. “When they’re warm. Out here they get restless.” He closed his eyes again. “You ever hear metal breathe?”

Clay straightened, said nothing.

Wilkins crouched a few feet away, tracing the mud with his finger, drawing spirals that rain erased as soon as they formed. “Hill’s full of voices,” he said quietly. “They’re stuck in the clay. That’s why it’s so heavy. Too many names in it.”

Criggs laughed once, short and sharp. “Hear that, sarge? Hill’s got names. Mine’s gonna be the last one it eats.” He cut another notch into the heel and wiped the blade clean on his trousers.

The fog pressed closer, visibility down to arm’s length. Somewhere upslope, a branch creaked like a door being opened slow. Harlow shifted, hand tightening around the grenades under his shirt. “Shut up,” he whispered. “I hear you. I fuckin’ hear you.”

No one slept. The rain kept falling. And the hill kept them, holding their boots and their dead and their counting, like it had been waiting a long time for men who listened.

They arrived like they'd been dropped from another planet—too clean, too loud, too alive. Eight of them. Boots still black, packs overstuffed, eyes wide like kids at a parade. They stepped off the chopper with their chins up, rifles cradled like sports gear, and the stink of stateside soap still clinging to their skin. Clay met them at the edge of the LZ with a clipboard and a head already aching. “You're late,” he said. One of them grinned. “We early enough to win it, though.”

None of them made it past the second week.

The jungle started in on them that same night. Rain pooled in their boots. Leeches hitched rides under their collars. Mosquitoes bit through mesh. One boy, Callahan, screamed in his sleep every night, begging for a woman named Annette who no one knew. Another kept trying to dig foxholes during watch, whispering that the trees moved when he blinked. Manson warned them to sleep with socks on and fingers off the trigger, but one still shot himself in the thigh climbing over a log in the dark. Criggs gave them all numbers instead of names. “Makes it easier,” he said.

On the sixth day, the rats came. Not the jungle ones—the big slick bastards that fed on corpses and chewed MRE wrappers into lace. These ones were smaller, twitchier, smarter. They moved in pairs, eyes like burnt copper. They snuck into boots and helmets, stole rations, left droppings shaped like commas across sleeping bags. One recruit—Thomson, the youngest—woke up shrieking just before dawn, clawing at his face. The rat had bitten through his eyelid while he slept. Took a piece of the lid with it.

They tried to save him. The medic cleaned it, stitched it, kept watch for fever. But the wound swelled fast, the skin darkened, and by the next morning his eye socket was leaking yellow pus that smelled like raw meat left too long in a drain. He stopped speaking. Just lay there, breathing through his teeth, his whole body shivering while the flies began to land on him even before he died. Wilkins lit incense beside him. “Not enough soul left to carry,” he said.

The others went soon after. One disappeared during a latrine break — no footprints, no sound, just a dropped flashlight in the mud. Another had a seizure and choked on his own tongue. Two more stepped on an old Bouncing Betty laid by the French, and when they found the legs, the boots were still clean. The last one walked into the river fully dressed and never came back up.

By the end of the second week, all eight were gone.

Clay didn’t write their names. He burned the roster. He watched the hill take them and didn’t speak. Manson carved no notches for them. Criggs only said, “Told you. It eats the clean ones first.”

No one argued. No one even blinked. The jungle doesn’t return what it borrows. It just stops pretending it ever took.

It started after the third night without sleep. Not the kind of insomnia that comes from fear or noise or too much heat, but the other kind — the quiet, heavy sleeplessness that clings like a wet blanket and makes even blinking feel dishonest. Clay stopped trying after that. He gave up on sleep and started building instead.

He began with wire — leftover spools from the old comm kit, bent copper stripped of insulation. He ran it low through the brush, knee height, tight enough to hum when you touched it. Then came nails. Dozens of them, sharpened and rusted, driven into boards he'd salvaged from an abandoned hut on the hill’s eastern side. Some he buried beneath leaves. Others he stood upright in jars of clay and ash, arranged in rings.

Harlow asked, once, who the traps were for.

“Not VC,” Clay said. “They don’t move like this.”

He carved notches into trees — three close together, one far. Laid small symbols on stones using bones he’d boiled clean: bird bones, rat bones, maybe human. Guerrero didn’t ask where they came from. He just handed him an old tin to keep them in. Criggs watched from a distance, chewing his gum to the beat of Clay’s hammer strokes. “You gonna ward off the boogeyman now, sarge?”

“Not warding,” Clay said without looking up. “Mapping.”

Wilkins helped him dig. Said nothing. Just followed silently, carrying stones marked with red clay and fingernail scratches, setting them where Clay pointed. “It listens,” Wilkins whispered one night. “Every time we step, it listens. Your traps give it something else to chew on.”

Manson didn’t interfere. He walked wide around the areas Clay marked off, even when patrols doubled back through them. Once he stepped too close to a circle of wire and heard something click. Didn’t ask. Just stepped back. “Whatever keeps us one inch ahead,” he said.

They stopped calling them traps. They started calling them marks.

Clay carved a spiral into the stock of his rifle, embedded a tooth into the heel of his boot, laid a small cage made of matchsticks beneath his hammock every night — just in case something tried to crawl in. He tied red thread between trees, not to trip but to catch things unseen. He boiled ink from leaves and tattooed a circle around his left wrist using the point of a penknife and a matchstick. Criggs watched him do it and didn't say a word.

No one tried to stop him. No one told command.

Because things had started moving around the camp at night. Noises that didn't match wind or monkeys or VC. Shapes that stood behind trees and didn't shift even when the fog did. The clay near the sleeping area stayed wet no matter the weather. One morning, they found footprints around their tents — barefoot, too small for any of them. The toes were wrong. Too long.

So Clay kept building.

And the jungle watched.

The patrol stepped off just after last light, five men moving downslope toward the tree line with the quiet confidence that comes from repetition. No arguments, no jokes. Just rifles checked by touch and a nod passed down the line. Clay watched them go from the edge of the perimeter, silhouettes dissolving into fog and brush. "Two hours," Harlow said. "Three, max." Clay nodded. He didn't say the other thing — that the jungle had been swallowing time lately, stretching it thin and leaving nothing behind.

They were gone by morning.

No gunfire. No flares. No radio check-in missed because there were none after dusk anymore. Radios died every night now, clean and total, like something turned a switch somewhere deep in the ground. Guerrero shook the handset anyway, cursed it, slapped the casing. Static hissed once, then fell silent again. Manson stared at the empty trail, jaw tight. "They didn't even break brush," he said. "How the hell they walk out without breaking brush?"

They found the tracks at first light. Five sets of boots, clear in the soft clay, heading straight into the jungle. No hesitation. No overlap. Just a line, neat as a drill diagram. Clay followed them ten meters in, then twenty. The prints stayed clean. No scuffing. No sign of running. No drag marks. They didn't fan out. They didn't turn back.

And then they stopped.

Not faded. Not lost in roots or leaves. They simply ended, as if the ground itself had decided that was enough record. Past that point, the jungle floor was untouched. No crushed grass. No snapped twigs. No blood. No shell casings. No smell. Just stillness.

Wilkins crouched near the last print and touched the clay with two fingers. “They were taken all at once,” he said. “That’s why there’s no mess. Mess comes from fear.”

“By what?” Criggs snapped. “You see any fuckin’ UFOs around?”

Wilkins looked up at him and smiled faintly. “Not everything comes from above.”

Clay called it. No pursuit. No widening sweep. He marked the spot with one of his bone symbols and backed away, slow, eyes never leaving the trees. Harlow didn’t argue. Manson didn’t either. They all felt it — that wrongness that crawled up the spine and settled behind the eyes. You could chase VC. You could chase men. You didn’t chase *this*.

That night, the radios went dead earlier than usual. Dusk hadn’t even finished bleeding out of the sky when the last transmission cut off mid-word. The jungle creaked, deep and slow, like something shifting its weight. Clay lay awake, listening to nothing and everything at once, and understood that the patrol hadn’t been killed.

They had been accepted.

Blood in the Bamboo

Cu Chi announced itself before they reached it. The ground changed first — firmer on top, hollow underneath, every step carrying a faint echo like walking over a buried drum. Bamboo thickened into walls, green stalks packed so tight they scraped webbing and helmets, leaves whispering even when no one touched them. The air smelled sharper here, copper and rot and old smoke trapped below the soil. “Welcome to the ant farm,” Criggs muttered. No one corrected him.

They found the tunnel mouth beside a cooking pit still warm, ashes gray and undisturbed. Fresh. Clay didn’t look at Manson when he assigned it. He didn’t have to. Manson was already kneeling, pulling his pack loose, face set in that flat, obedient way that had replaced most of his old expressions. “Same drill,” Clay said. Rope, pistol, flashlight. Manson nodded once. His hands shook when he tied the rope. Just a little.

He went down slow, boots scraping clay, shoulders turning sideways to fit. The tunnel swallowed light fast. Within seconds the flashlight beam flattened into a dull circle, walls close enough to brush his cheeks. Above ground, the rope twitched as he crawled deeper, breathing loud in the silence. Harlow crouched near the opening, counting under his breath. Wilkins stood back, head tilted, listening like the earth was speaking directly into his ear.

Manson was gone longer than usual. Too long for a simple recon. The rope stopped moving. Clay leaned in, pressed his ear to the ground. Nothing. No sound of crawling, no whisper of breath. Just the weight of dirt and something else beneath it, something vast and patient. When the rope finally tugged once — not the signal, just a weak pull — Clay tightened his grip and waited.

Manson emerged like a thing born wrong. His face was gray, lips blue, eyes too wide for the sockets. He clawed at the dirt as if the tunnel had tried to keep him. When they pulled him free, Clay caught his hands and froze. Manson's fingernails were black. Not dirty — black through and through, the color spreading into the cuticles like ink soaked into paper.

"What did you see?" Clay asked, voice low.

Manson swallowed hard. His throat worked like it had forgotten how. "There's a door," he said finally. "Down there. Not a shaft. Not a turn. A door." He laughed once, thin and broken. "It's standing up. Like it's waiting for someone tall."

"A bunker?" Harlow asked. "VC?"

Manson shook his head. "No hinges. No frame. Just… cut into the dirt. Smooth. Like stone that learned to be soil." He looked at his hands again, flexed his fingers slowly. "It's not made by men. Men don't build things that way."

Wilkins crouched in front of him, eyes shining. "Did it open?"

Manson closed his eyes. "It breathed."

No one sent him back down. Clay ordered the tunnel collapsed, charges packed deep. The explosion thumped through the ground, bamboo shaking, birds lifting in a frantic black cloud. When the dust settled, the earth looked untouched, as if it had simply closed its mouth.

That night, Manson sat apart from the others, scraping at his nails with a knife, trying to get the black out. It didn't come off. He stared at his hands like they belonged to someone else and whispered, "It knows my name now."

The rain started on a Thursday and never left. It fell thick and heavy like poured oil, not in sheets but in ropes — long, straight lines that cut through the canopy and turned the jungle into something underwater. Everything rotted. Socks, webbing, skin. The air lost its scent and took on weight instead, pressing against lungs like wet wool. Boots never dried. Blisters turned to ulcers. Rifles jammed even when cleaned. The ground stopped being solid. It sucked at their steps and grew teeth.

After six days, no one used tents anymore. They just wrapped themselves in ponchos and leaned against trees, waiting for the hours to pass like fever. After ten, Guerrero stopped speaking and just stared into the sky with a kind of awe, as if the clouds were trying to say something he couldn't quite catch. On the twelfth day, Harlow fired three rounds into a patch of mud because he thought it blinked at him.

Then, on the fourteenth night, they found Becker face down outside the sleeping perimeter. His body was soft to the touch, skin puffed, no wounds. Just sunk half an inch into the muck, mouth open. The medic rolled him over and water — not rainwater, but brown, stinking mud — poured out of his nose and mouth like his lungs had been filled by the hill itself. His lips were blue. No flailing, no scratches. He'd drowned in his sleep without moving.

Criggs refused to look at the body. "You tell me how the hell a man drowns with no goddamn puddle," he said, pacing tight circles. "You tell me that. You tell me that right now."

Clay had no answer. Neither did anyone else.

Wilkins sat cross-legged in the shelter of a banyan root, shirt off, water tracing every ridge of his ribs. He'd been silent for most of the week, save for the songs — those low, tuneless mutters that drifted through the rain and made no sense to anyone else. That night, after Becker's body was wrapped and set aside for evac that would never come, Wilkins took a sewing needle and a bottle of ink he'd boiled from his journal pages and began pricking the skin of his eyelids.

Clay crouched beside him. "What the hell are you doing?"

Wilkins didn't stop. His hands were steady. The blood mixed with rain, ran down his cheeks in black-red threads. "Can't see what's coming with the old eyes," he said

softly. “Need new ones. Need watchers in the dark. This way, I can see even when I sleep.”

“You’ll go blind,” Clay said.

“I already went,” Wilkins murmured. “I’m just writing down the path back.”

He finished both lids by dawn. Thin black lines ran across them, symbols tight and curling like centipedes. He didn’t flinch when they scabbed. Didn’t blink when the blood dried into crust.

The rain didn’t stop. Becker’s body sank deeper into the soil with each passing hour until only the toes of his boots remained above ground. No one tried to dig him out. No one even marked the spot.

The jungle had taken him. And the hill was still hungry.

She stepped out of the treeline just after midday, barefoot, soaked to the knees, holding a bundle of cassava in one hand and nothing in the other. No warning, no sound — just a sudden shape through the bamboo, thin and hunched, eyes downcast, like she'd been waiting for them to find her. The rain had finally eased into a mist, enough to see her clearly as she moved toward the creek where their patrol was filtering through the reeds. Criggs saw her first.

Clay raised his hand to pause the column. The woman didn't look up. Mid-forties maybe, worn down to bone and breath. Hair tied back with a red ribbon soaked dark. Her face slack with something beyond fear — that numbness people wore after enough years of watching the world break around them. She walked slow, placing her feet carefully on the slick stones, moving toward the waiting dugout canoe pulled halfway onto the bank.

“She's not a threat,” Harlow said. Voice low.

Criggs didn’t move. His rifle stayed up, muzzle tracking her like a sensor. Wilkins watched him from the shade, face unreadable. The woman turned her head just a little — just enough to show the curve of her cheek — and in that moment Criggs pulled the trigger.

The shot cracked like a snapped branch. The cassava scattered.

She fell backward into the mud, one arm twitching once before stilling completely. Blood spilled from her chest in a slow, dark puddle, spreading around the bundle of roots. Her eyes stayed open. Criggs lowered his rifle. His jaw was tight, the corners of

his mouth trembling. “She looked like my mother,” he said. “When I was nine. Same face. Same ribbon.”

No one moved. No one touched the body.

Clay stared at the corpse for a long time before motioning forward. “Canoe,” he said. That was all.

They placed her inside without words — hands gentle, almost reverent. Manson tied her wrist to the inner rail with a strip of twine so she wouldn’t roll if the current got rough. Wilkins tucked the cassava beside her. Criggs stood at the stern, eyes distant, rain collecting on his helmet, sliding down his nose in perfect, even drips.

They pushed the canoe off into the current and watched it drift.

The jungle swallowed it before it reached the bend. Just a shadow between reeds and fog.

No report was written. No words were spoken.

Just the soft sound of water accepting a weight it didn’t question.

It didn’t fall like rain at first. It drifted. A fine powder, gray-yellow, carried on a wind that didn’t move the trees. The sky overhead split in strips, helicopters low and sluggish, trailing mist that shimmered even in the clouded light. They thought it was smoke at first. Then the sting hit — eyes, throat, the wet insides of the nose catching fire like match tips under flesh.

“Chemical drop!” Harlow shouted, dragging his bandana over his mouth too late.

Guerrero — Buckshot — dropped to one knee, blood already running from his nostrils in thick threads. It glistened along his lips and down his chin. His mouth opened to speak but the words came out as a wet cough, then more blood. Then came his ears — first one, then the other — slow streams that rolled down his neck into the collar of his fatigues. He didn’t scream. Just blinked hard and sat still, as if even breath might rupture something else inside him.

Criggs cursed and fired into the air, empty gesture, bullets vanishing into mist. “You fuckin' bastards,” he growled. “Sprayin' us like roaches. Who the fuck’s left to fight now?”

The mist clung to everything — leaves, weapons, skin. It turned sweat slick. Wilkins dropped to his knees beside a fallen log, shaking, eyes wide. Then suddenly, laughter. High, bright, endless. Clay spun toward him and stopped.

Wilkins had a lizard in both hands — long-bodied, pale green, tail twitching. He bit it in half in one clean motion, teeth snapping through spine and meat and gut. The back half flailed once before falling. Blood and slime smeared his chin.

“Sacrifice!” he shouted. “Little priest of the dirt! You go first!”

He kept laughing, voice rising until it cracked. Then a choke — a real one — and he doubled over, gagging on blood and scale. Harlow stepped forward to help, but Clay put a hand out. “Leave him,” he said.

The air reeked now — not just of chemicals, but of fear coming out through the skin. The jungle wilted in patches, leaves shriveling in seconds, ferns collapsing like paper set alight without fire. The birds had stopped. The bugs had stopped. Even the sky looked sick.

Manson rubbed his face, left red streaks. “This isn’t to kill the trees,” he said. “This is to see what we do when nothing’s left to hide behind.”

Guerrero rocked slightly, hands over his ears, lips moving soundlessly. Harlow knelt next to him, offering canteen water, but he didn’t drink. Just kept his head bowed, the blood still coming, slower now. Tired.

They didn’t speak for hours after the mist settled.

Nothing felt clean. Nothing would again.

He couldn’t have been more than thirteen. Barefoot, ribs showing through a threadbare shirt, hands black with mud and rice husks. They caught him near the edge of the perimeter, creeping low through a slit in the bush line with a burlap sack slung over one shoulder and a tin pot clutched to his chest. Harlow tackled him first, drove him into the mud with a grunt, rifle barrel pressed to the boy’s skull before the others even registered movement. The kid didn’t fight. Didn’t beg. Just stared up at them with eyes that looked too old for the skin around them.

“He was crawling from the village supply,” Manson said, kicking the sack open. “Half a sack of rice. Pot full of old fish bones. Not a weapon on him.”

“Could be a scout,” Criggs snapped, breathing heavy. “Could be signalin’ for a hit.”

“Or just hungry,” Clay muttered.

They tied his wrists with bootlace and sat him in the rain, back to a tree, while the rest circled. Wilkins knelt in front of him, staring. “Doesn’t blink,” he said. “Like a bird that already knows the glass is there.”

Criggs moved first. Just one boot into the boy’s ribs — not hard enough to kill, but enough to start something. The others followed, not all at once, not with fury, but with the weight of weeks and the rot of silence eating into their spines. The boy made no sound at first. His eyes stayed wide open, tracking nothing. When he finally cried, it wasn’t loud. It was high and broken and brief. Then gone.

No one gave the order to stop. They just tired out.

They left him tied to the tree. By morning, he was gone. No sign of struggle. No footprints. The rice sack lay half-buried in the wet soil, torn and spilling like a gutted animal. The rope lay coiled, unknotted, beside the tree roots.

That night, as they tried to sleep, the sound came back.

Not from the perimeter. Not from the trail.

From the trees.

The same crying — thin, shaking, wrong. It echoed from high above, as though the canopy had swallowed his voice and learned how to mimic it. Criggs sat bolt upright, eyes wild, rifle across his knees. “That ain’t no monkey,” he whispered. “That ain’t nothin’ with lungs.”

Harlow tossed a rock into the dark. Nothing answered.

But the crying didn’t stop.

Not that night. Not the one after.

The Tet Shatter

Hue was already burning when they got there. Not smoke on the horizon — fire at their feet. Whole blocks swallowed in orange, walls blackened, windows coughing glass. The streets were narrow, the corners tighter than breath, and every doorway promised a muzzle flash. The Tet Offensive had snapped the war wide open like a ribcage, and Hue was its broken heart, beating out rounds in short, ugly bursts. They

moved building to building, boots crunching on tile and bone, shouting over the echo of gunfire that never ended.

No jungle here. No trees. Just concrete, rebar, plaster dust, and screams.

Criggs kicked open a door and caught buckshot in the shoulder, vanished behind the threshold while Clay laid suppressing fire up a stairwell that wasn't there the day before. Manson's helmet got torn off by a falling ceiling fan. The house next to theirs collapsed with a low groan, the foundation eaten hollow by artillery. Wilkins emerged from the smoke with blood down his chin, dragging a VC corpse with no head and no shoes, muttering a song in French he swore he never learned.

Harlow went into a three-story with two others.

Only Harlow came back.

He walked out slow, face blank, arms swinging loose like he'd just left a movie. His shirt was soaked through, his helmet missing, and four neat holes marked a line from hip to chest, spaced like a heartbeat. Clay froze when he saw him, stepped forward instinctively, hand already reaching for the pressure bandage.

"Don't," Harlow said.

Clay stared at the holes. No blood. No twitch. Just black circles ringed with cloth threads and the stink of burnt powder. "You hit?"

"I felt 'em go in," Harlow said softly. "Felt 'em. But they didn't stay." He smiled, or maybe his mouth just shifted that way. "I'm still here."

Criggs looked over, shoulder wrapped in gauze. "Jesus Christ," he said, voice flat. "You ain't bulletproof, man."

"No," Harlow said, walking past him. "But I'm not whatever I was last week either."

He lit a cigarette with hands that didn't shake.

The rest of the platoon didn't ask questions. They stopped counting wounds that didn't bleed. Stopped writing names on helmets. Hue took too many things to bother naming anymore. The houses were filled with fire and teeth — and something else that watched through the walls like memory too old to forget.

They kept fighting. There was no choice. The city didn't offer one.

They found the room after clearing a schoolhouse that had collapsed inward like a jaw. Second floor blown off, desks splintered, chalk still smeared across half a blackboard that hung upside down from the rafters. In the basement — really just a hollowed storage pit reinforced with rotting wood and rebar — they found crates of paper sealed in oilcloth. Wilkins ripped the first one open and pulled out handfuls of leaflets, still dry, the ink fresh-smelling despite the rot of the air.

Clay shone his flashlight across the walls — red stars, hammer and sickle, Uncle Ho's calm face printed a hundred times over. Phrases scrawled in Vietnamese and Russian. Some leaflets had American G.I.s pictured kneeling before barefoot children, handing over rifles. Others showed Nixon as a lizard. In one, a soldier screamed in agony, flames licking from his helmet as silhouettes of Vietnamese peasants pointed with rifles slung across their backs.

Manson stood motionless near a stack that hadn't been touched. His breathing turned rough, shallow, like a man seeing something from too far inside. "This one," he muttered, pulling a folded leaflet from the pile. "I know this one." He turned it in his hand slowly. Clay glanced at it — just another sheet, same print, same face, same slogans.

"She was holding a flower," Manson whispered. "Same way. The same one my mother held when I left for basic. That exact damn flower."

"You're seeing ghosts," Criggs said.

Manson stepped back, lighter already flicking open, lips tight. "If they're ghosts, I don't want to know what's making the paper." He touched flame to corner. The leaflet curled instantly, ash drifting up in the dim room like dead moths. He dropped it onto the rest.

The whole stack caught, and within seconds the basement glowed orange, the fire crawling fast and low, seeking ink and memory. Clay didn't stop him. No one did. The smoke smelled sweet, almost floral, and left a bitter taste on the tongue. Wilkins muttered a prayer in a language none of them had heard before.

When they emerged back into the wrecked courtyard, the sky was sick with low clouds and copper sunlight. They turned a corner onto the street and found three burned-out armored vehicles, abandoned and half-sunken into rubble. Soviet models — Clay recognized the outlines from old briefing manuals back in Saigon.

One was a BTR-40, the front hatch torn open and the tires melted into the pavement. Another was a PT-76 amphibious tank, the turret caved like someone had crushed it

with a god's fist. The third was a ZIL-157 truck, scorched clean through, rusted frame still holding to a mounted DShK heavy machine gun that pointed straight up like it had been praying when the shell hit.

Wilkins walked past them with his hand trailing along the metal. "Russians don't die here," he said. "They just leave the bones and go home clean."

Manson didn't look at the wrecks. He kept his eyes on the gray sky, the smell of burning paper still caught in his beard. "She didn't smile in the picture," he said, half to himself. "But I remember she used to."

They walked on.

The street behind them was quiet, but the leaflets still burned underground.

The vision didn't come like a dream. It came standing up — full daylight, weapon slung, boots on scorched pavement near the shattered remains of a temple wall. One moment Clay was watching Harlow piss into the rubble, and the next he wasn't anywhere near Hue. The city dropped away without noise or warning, like the floor of a stage swallowed by dark.

He stood in the jungle again, but not the one they patrolled.

It was brighter — sun slicing straight through the trees like columns of glass, the air still, no sound, not even insects. Before him stretched a clearing wide as a football field, and in it, the men.

All thirty-five.

Buried chest-deep in a perfect, silent circle.

Their torsos rose from the earth, naked but clean, arms at their sides, shoulders burned red. Each man stared upward with eyes glassy and unmoving, lips dry and cracked. No one blinked. No one breathed. The sun sat overhead like a lid. The jungle shimmered around them, green and gold and pulsing with heat. He tried to speak but his tongue didn't move. Tried to step forward, but the ground had no weight.

One of them — maybe Becker, maybe someone older — opened his mouth. Clay thought sound would come. Instead, a single beetle crawled out, black and slow, clicking its legs against the man's teeth as it vanished down his chin and into the dirt again.

Clay staggered backward. The clearing dissolved.

When he came to, he was kneeling in the dirt behind a collapsed wall, fingers bleeding where they'd scraped the stone. No one had noticed. Harlow still zipped up, Criggs crouched lighting a smoke, Manson digging into a can of sardines without tasting them. Clay reached for a stick, cleared a patch of dirt, and wrote what he saw.

Thirty-five men. Chest-deep. No names. No screams. No exit.

Then he covered the message with a layer of moss, pressed it flat with the heel of his palm, and stood.

Wilkins walked past him moments later, pausing just long enough to glance down.

"You saw the circle," he said. Not a question.

Clay didn't answer.

They moved on. The moss didn't. It stayed where it was, keeping the words beneath it like roots keep bones.

They found the monkey half-dead under the ruins of a blasted gate, one of those slender, long-limbed gray types that hung in the banyans and screamed at nothing. It was mangled — maybe shrapnel, maybe rot — but still breathing, its chest stuttering like a broken pump. Criggs squatted beside it, rifle resting on his knees, watching the creature's eyes flick left and right like it was trying to remember something just out of reach.

"Jungle's full of food," he muttered. "Meat's meat."

Clay said nothing. No one did. Not when Criggs snapped its neck. Not when he skinned it. Not even when he cooked the pieces over a tin plate of Sterno, the stink of burning fur mixing with diesel smoke and burnt cordite still lingering from last night's shelling. He tore at the leg meat with his teeth, chewing slowly, like he was trying to feel his way through memory. "Tastes like pork," he said. "If the pig had nightmares."

Manson turned away. Guerrero stared at the trees, hands twitching. Wilkins watched every bite.

No one told him.

They all knew.

The villagers had mentioned it in passing two days ago, in that way they do when the truth hides under the shape of a story: that some monkeys — the old ones, the ones

with white scars on their lips and black rings around their eyes — were sacred. Guardians. Spirits of those who died with something left unfinished. You didn't touch them. You didn't speak their names.

Criggs had just eaten one.

That night, the jungle was too still. Even the usual things — the wind in the leaves, the wheeze of frogs, the static hum in the radios — fell silent, as if everything was crouched, watching.

Just after 0200 hours, a flash lit the eastern sky. Bright, steady, unnatural. No explosion. No tracer fire. Just a glow that bled into the clouds.

At dawn, the news filtered in: a Buddhist monk had walked to the crossroads outside a hamlet five clicks east, poured gasoline from a battered metal can over his head, and sat in lotus position. Witnesses said he never flinched. Not when he struck the match. Not when the flames wrapped around him. Not when his skin blackened and peeled.

Wilkins said nothing for hours.

Later, as Clay stood watch, he heard Wilkins whisper to himself, slow and deliberate. "He saw the smoke. That was the offering. Balance paid."

Criggs belched from across the fire, then spat something pink into the coals.

The flames snapped once, sharp as a crack in the sky.

The rain came back that night — not the hammering kind, but a thin, greasy drizzle that clung to the skin like oil. It slicked their rifles, softened the mud until boots vanished ankle-deep, and turned the breath of the jungle into steam. They made camp along a broken causeway north of Hue, surrounded by cratered stone and trees too warped to grow straight. Something in the soil felt wrong. Even the insects kept low.

Wilkins was the first to speak in his sleep.

It started as a hum, deep in the throat, rhythmic but uneven. Then the hum became syllables, strung together in no cadence anyone knew. The sound filled the camp like fog — soft but thick, seeping into the ear, brushing across the inside of the skull. Criggs muttered in his sleep. Harlow twitched and kicked his blanket off. Manson sat up and reached for his rifle. Clay just watched Wilkins's lips move and knew without knowing that it wasn't any human tongue. Not anymore.

When Manson fired, no one flinched.

A single round, aimed at nothing — a shadow between trees that wasn't there a moment before, tall and jointless, flickering with the breeze.

"I saw it," Manson whispered, lowering the rifle. "Same thing from the tunnel. Watching us sideways."

Clay didn't answer. He checked the round count, then went back to staring at Wilkins. The singing had stopped, but the sound still rang under the canopy, faint as a pulse.

At dawn, the captain was gone.

Not killed. Not dragged. Just gone.

His hammock was still strung up, neat and dry. Boots in place. Sidearm holstered. But the webbing was missing — the belt, the compass, the field notes. No prints. No trail. Just the absence of him, like a word skipped mid-sentence. Guerrero called out twice before Clay shut him up with a glance.

No one said the word *desertion.*

They didn't need to.

They waited half the day. Packed silently. No orders came.

Clay rose, strapped the radio to his back, and slung the captain's sidearm low on his thigh. He didn't speak. He didn't have to. The others stood. Adjusted gear. Checked their magazines. Looked to Clay when the path bent or when the wind died, the way they had already started doing weeks ago.

Manson lit a cigarette and fell into step beside him.

"Guess that makes you the ghost shepherd now," he said.

Clay didn't respond.

He just walked deeper into the green.

Red Sky Boy

They moved through the delta like threshers, blades hot and teeth gritted, dragging behind them the machinery of Operation Speedy Express — gunships overhead, kill-ratios whispered over radios like prayers, villages marked not by names but numbers, coordinates, tallies. The sun rose red that morning, not metaphor but fact, a hard, bruised sky hanging over the rice paddies like it had watched everything from too close for too long. Mist clung low, steaming off bodies not yet cold.

The stench hit before the sight. Clay waved flies from his face, but they didn't care. Neither did the birds.

The bodies were stacked in the shallows — not arranged, just dropped. Men in black pajamas, women with arms curled around their bellies, a boy maybe ten, face down, legs bent backward like a puppet whose strings had snapped. He had no visible wound. Just the stillness of something broken in a room no one entered. The water had turned pink where he lay, petals from a flowering tree floating around his body like a wreath someone meant to place and never did.

Manson knelt beside the child and wept without noise. Not the kind of sobbing that needed company — the deep kind, cracked from some locked place, coming up from his gut until his whole face trembled and blood dripped from his nose, unnoticed. His rifle lay beside him, forgotten in the grass.

"He wasn't in the fight," Manson whispered. "He wasn't in the goddamn fight."

Clay didn't answer. No one did.

Criggs stepped over a corpse without looking down. Wilkins crouched in the mud a few meters away, drawing something into the wet soil with the blade of his bayonet — a spiral, a face, a sun with no eyes. Guerrero stared at the treeline, knuckles white on his grip, sweat beading down his neck.

Harlow stood the longest.

He didn't blink. Didn't speak.

He just looked at the boy like the world had stopped pretending.

The sun climbed higher. More rot came with it. The birds circled, low and quiet. Clay checked his watch, then didn't read the time. He squatted beside Manson, put a hand on his shoulder, and squeezed once — not a gesture of comfort, just an anchor.

"We move," he said.

They stepped around the paddies like stepping through memory, careful not to look down too long, careful not to speak the numbers anymore. The red sky watched them go, and behind them the water swallowed the silence.

The river wasn't on any of Clay's maps. Wide, black, slow-moving — more like oil than water. It cut through the jungle like a scar, no bends, no sandbars, just a thick, dark line choked with dead branches and something that looked like hair caught on the roots. They'd followed its edge for a day and a half, looking for a place to cross, but every time they stopped, the current seemed slower. And deeper.

"No ferries. No locals. Nothing built near it," Manson said, scanning the bank. "Doesn't make sense."

"It's not a river," Wilkins said, standing at the edge, eyes narrowed. "It breathes."

Criggs scoffed, swatted at a mosquito the size of a bottlecap. "What, we back to ghosts and singing dirt now?"

But none of them liked looking at it for long.

The water didn't reflect anything. Not the trees. Not the sky. Not them. It just held its surface flat, as if the idea of reflection was beneath it. Clay threw a stick in. It vanished without a splash.

The jungle behind them whispered louder that day, the kind of noise that rises when something ahead demands more attention than what's behind. Clay picked the narrowest stretch — thirty yards — and gave the nod.

First man in was Warren. Tall, quiet, always chewed the same piece of gum, even in sleep. He stripped his gear, held his rifle above his head, stepped into the current slow and careful. It barely rippled around his thighs. At waist-deep, he looked back once. "Feels warm," he said.

Then he was gone.

No shout. No flailing. No bubbles. Just a sudden absence. One blink he was there. The next, only his helmet spinning on the surface for a breath before tipping under. The others stood frozen, rifles half-raised, watching the water settle like nothing had happened at all.

Clay scanned the riverbank. No movement. No sound but the trees.

"We pull back," he said, voice tight. "We follow it north."

They moved upstream two more days without trying again.

A sound — not a scream. Not at first. Just a heavy snap and the wet slap of a body breaking rhythm with the earth.

Clay turned in time to see Denton vanish into the ground.

It wasn't far — maybe six feet down — but the noise that followed made it feel bottomless. A thick, wet crunch, then a kind of bubbling gasp that sounded too much like laughter. They rushed forward, weapons up, too late for anything but looking.

The hole was lined with sharpened bamboo, stakes cut and shaved to a point, their tips dark and smeared with something that smelled worse than death. Human waste. Rot. Whatever bile the jungle could give back.

Denton had fallen hard. The top half of him still moved — one arm twitching against the edge of the pit — but most of his body was already sinking, pulled down by his own weight. A stake had punched through his groin, splitting everything soft between his legs. Another had rammed up beneath his ribs, skewering the stomach and curling his spine. One perfect spike had gone straight through his chest and into the heart — his shirt rising around the shaft like a flag raised wrong.

He didn't scream at first. Just made this choking sound, eyes wide, mouth full of blood, hands clawing at the air. Then a low moan, guttural, like something trying to speak underwater. Criggs leaned over the edge, called his name, but Denton couldn't hear it.

His body shuddered once.

The bamboo groaned under him.

Then he stopped moving — impaled on a dozen spikes, each one coated with filth that would've killed him even if the wounds hadn't.

Nobody climbed in after him.

They just stood there.

The jungle, as always, said nothing. Thye made a stop to rest.

The fire was low, more ember than flame, casting long shadows that twitched across the canvas of their faces. One by one, they passed the blackened spoon, the metal warm from the flame and bent like it had seen war too. Wilkins tied off first, rubber tubing tight around his arm, eyes already half-closed like the needle had whispered a

lullaby before touching skin. The plunger slid in slow. A breath left his lips, soft and high. He leaned back against the tree like gravity had finally made sense.

Pot smoke drifted like fog between them, thick and sweet, curling through the web of branches above. Someone was laughing at nothing — Manson maybe — a sharp, cracked sound that bent into coughing. Clay sat cross-legged, a joint burning down between his fingers, eyes glassy, watching the smoke curl around the barrel of his rifle.

One more soldier took some taren.

On the third morning, they found Warren's boots on the shoreline. Upright. Side by side. Laces still tied. No footprints. No blood. No sign of animal.

Just the boots. Inside one of them, Wilkins found a single tooth. Still warm. Still wet.

He didn't say whose. He just placed it in a pouch, touched his tattooed eyelids with his fingers, and whispered, "It let us borrow him. Now it wants him back."

They didn't cross. They didn't go back. They followed the river. The river watched.

They noticed her on the second day after the river, a shape that didn't belong to the trees. Too small. Too quiet. Clay caught the movement first — a flicker of pale cloth behind a stand of bamboo, gone the moment he turned his head. Harlow saw her next, squinting down the trail. "Kid," he said once. "Girl, maybe." By the time Criggs raised his rifle, there was nothing there but leaves settling back into place.

She followed them without being seen doing it. Always there at the edge — a footstep that didn't echo, a breath that wasn't breath. Too young to speak. Too light to leave tracks that lasted longer than a blink. Manson tried once to catch her, broke into a run through the undergrowth, branches tearing at his sleeves. He came back scratched and empty-handed. "She's fast," he said. "Not like running fast. Like she's already where she's going."

They tried to scare her off. Fired shots into the air. Shouted. Threw rocks. The jungle swallowed the noise and gave nothing back. At night, Clay would see her crouched at the perimeter, knees tucked to her chest, hair hanging straight down her face. When the fire flared, she was gone. Wilkins smiled whenever he glimpsed her. "She's counting us," he said. "That's what children do."

On the fourth night, no one heard her come in.

Clay woke to the weight first — a slight pressure against his side, warm, almost familiar. Harlow stirred on the other side at the same time, breath catching sharp. Between them, curled small and still, lay the girl. She wore a torn dress bleached nearly white, feet caked with old mud, hands folded under her chin like she'd learned how to sleep from watching. Clay didn't move. Didn't breathe. He waited for something to happen.

Her face turned toward the firelight.

Where her eyes should have been, there was only smooth skin. No scars. No sockets. Just flesh, unbroken, like they had never been there to begin with. Her mouth curved faintly, not a smile, just a resting shape. She breathed slow and deep.

Harlow's hand crept toward his knife. Clay stopped him with two fingers on his wrist. They lay there until dawn, neither of them sleeping, the girl nestled between them like something returned to where it belonged.

When the sun finally broke through the canopy, she was gone.

Only a faint warmth remained in the damp ground, and a thin trail of pressed leaves leading back into the jungle, already closing behind her.

Criggs said it without drama, like he was reporting the weather. They were stopped in a stand of scrub teak just before dusk, light thinning into that bruised purple that made distances lie. Clay was checking the perimeter marks when he heard Criggs speak behind him, voice flat, almost bored. "I watched myself walk past that tree," he said. "About an hour ago. Didn't wave. Didn't look back."

Clay turned slowly. Criggs sat on a fallen log, rifle across his knees, hands steady. His eyes were clear. Not drunk. Not high. Not laughing. "What do you mean, watched yourself?" Clay asked.

Criggs shrugged. "Mean I was standing there, same boots, same stink, same ugly mug. Saw the back of my own head. I knew it was me because I was limping a little on the left, same as now." He tapped his heel, the one with the carved marks. "He walked right through the brush and didn't bend a thing."

Manson stopped cleaning his weapon. Harlow didn't look up, but his jaw tightened. Wilkins leaned forward, interested. "Did he look lighter?" Wilkins asked. "Like he didn't have to carry anything?"

Criggs thought about it. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, actually. Like he dropped his pack somewhere good.”

“You hallucinating,” Manson said, too quick.

Criggs shook his head. “Nah. I know when my brain’s fuckin’ with me. This wasn’t that. This was… confirmation.” He scratched at the stubble on his jaw, eyes fixed on the trees. “I ain’t in my body right all the time anymore. Sometimes I’m watching from a little ways off. Like the part that hurts already left.”

The jungle creaked, long and slow, the same sound Clay had heard months ago on the hill. Harlow finally spoke, still staring at the ground. “You saying we’re dead?”

Criggs smiled then, small and tired. “I’m sayin’ we’re ghosts,” he said. “Just haven’t laid down yet. We’re already gone. That’s why none of this sticks.” He rapped his knuckles against his chest once, hard. “This is just the noise we make on the way out.”

No one argued. No one laughed. Clay felt the words settle into him like damp earth, heavy but fitting. He looked at the men — thinner now, quieter, edges blurred — and thought of the girl with no eyes, the river that swallowed without sound, the patrol that ended in clean footprints and nowhere else.

Wilkins nodded slowly. “That explains why they can see us,” he said.

Criggs carved another notch into his boot heel, careful and precise, then wiped the blade clean. “One more soul,” he murmured. “Might as well keep count till the end.”

The light faded completely. When Clay looked up again, the trees seemed farther apart than they had been a moment before, as if something unseen had just walked through them without needing to push.

Clay gathered the maps just before dawn — old, stained, folded and refolded until the creases cut through the rivers, the villages, the thin red arrows that meant movement or death. Some were printed back in Saigon, others hand-marked in pencil and grease. Manson watched him from the log with the cracked bark, not asking, just listening to the sound of paper being stacked. There was no wind, but the trees shifted like breath, leaves turning inward.

The others stirred slowly from sleep. Harlow opened one eye, then closed it again. Wilkins stood with his arms crossed and said nothing. Criggs scratched at his

shoulder and spat. Clay didn't say a word. He struck the match, held it steady until the flame caught clean, then touched it to the bottom of the stack.

The maps went up fast — all that fiber and ink baked in sweat and fear. Flames rolled up and over the trails they'd never finish. Villages they'd already erased. Borders that never mattered in the heat. Manson flinched when the last one burned through and drifted ash into his lap.

"We won't find our way out now," he said quietly.

"There's no out," Clay replied.

From that day, they stopped using names.

First it was the ones who'd died — no more lists, no more ranks. Then it was each other. Clay became just the one who moved first. Criggs the one with the boots. Harlow was eyes forward. Wilkins was the mouth. Manson, hands. It was easier that way. Lighter. Like their names had too much weight to carry anymore, a drag line of memory they didn't need for the kind of walking they were doing.

The new man came in just after a resupply drop — a replacement or a mistake, no one could tell. Young. Clean kit. Kept a notebook. Tried to get the count right.

"Should be thirty," he said the first night. "I see twenty-eight."

Clay didn't respond. Neither did the others. The kid looked nervous, wrote it down anyway.

Next day, he asked again. "Twenty-seven?"

Wilkins laughed, quiet and mean.

The night after, the kid was gone.

No blood. No pack left behind. No scream. Just his notebook on a stump, open to a page that read: "They're not all here, but someone else is."

They didn't go looking.

After that, they stopped counting too.

The jungle didn't want numbers. The war didn't want records.

Clay looked at the ash the next morning and knew the fire had done something right. Directions were for people going somewhere. They weren't. They were already there.

The Mouth of the Earth

They chose the place at dusk, when the light thinned enough to hide the mouth but not enough to pretend it wasn't there. No map marked it. No order came down. It sat at the base of a limestone rise where the earth sagged inward, a wide, dark opening half-choked with roots and broken stone, breathing out air that felt older than rain. Clay stood at the edge and felt it against his face — warm, damp, steady. Not a draft. A breath.

No one asked why.

They stripped down to light gear. Pistols, knives, one flashlight between every two men. The radios were left topside without discussion — they hadn't worked underground in years anyway. Wilkins pressed his tattooed eyelids with his thumbs and nodded. Harlow checked his grenades by feel and tucked them back inside his shirt like sleeping animals. Criggs carved one last notch into his boot heel, then snapped the blade shut.

Buckshot came out of the trees just as they were about to go in.

At first Clay thought it was fog moving wrong. Then the shape stepped into view. Guerrero stood barefoot at the edge of the clearing, uniform hanging loose, skin pale to the point of translucence, veins like blue wires under paper. His eyes were wrong — not white, not blind, just milked, as if whatever color they'd once held had been washed clean and never put back.

"Buckshot," Clay said.

Guerrero tilted his head slowly, like the word took effort. His mouth opened once, closed, then opened again. "It's warm down there," he said. His voice was thin but calm, almost pleased. "Real warm. Like you don't gotta keep breathing so hard."

Harlow stepped forward. "How long you been gone?"

Guerrero didn't answer. He looked past them, toward the hole, and smiled faintly, lips cracking. "You don't fall," he added. "You just… fit." Then he sat down where he stood, legs folding under him like he'd been turned off.

They carried him back to the perimeter and laid him under a tarp. The medic checked him out of habit. No wounds. No fever. No reaction to light. He breathed slow and deep, chest rising and falling like a man sleeping somewhere far away. When he woke the next morning, he stared at the canopy and didn't speak. Not then. Not later. Not again.

They went underground an hour after that.

One by one, they disappeared into the mouth, bodies swallowed cleanly by shadow, the earth closing behind them without sound. Clay went last. As he stepped inside, the light behind him dimmed, and for a moment he felt something like hands at his shoulders — not pulling, not pushing. Just guiding.

The ground was warm. And it was waiting.

The tunnels began as expected — narrow, humid, shoulder-grinding tight. The kind the VC used, carved with knives and bare hands, crawling routes and breathing holes no wider than a coffin. They moved crouched, dragging gear behind them, lights dimmed, breathing shallow. Criggs kept muttering to himself, the words low and looping. Wilkins hummed in rhythm with his steps. Harlow said nothing, hand never leaving the curve of his blade.

Then the walls changed.

At first it was just the smoothness. Earth turned to something harder — stone, maybe, but not laid in blocks like modern work. These were curved slabs fitted so close that not even Clay's bootknife could find a seam. Symbols rose faintly from the surface, not etched but grown, their edges worn soft by time and warmth. Spirals, teeth, shapes that flickered different the longer you stared.

"Not ours," Manson whispered. "Not theirs either."

No one responded.

Fifty yards in, the tunnel widened without warning into a chamber just big enough to stand. In the center, a stairwell spiraled down — steps worn concave by centuries of feet, or something heavier. No light source below. Just heat. Damp, steady, rising like breath from a deep lung.

Criggs took one step down, then another. "This ain't VC," he said. "This ain't human."

Clay didn't stop him.

They went down.

Twenty-two steps, then a landing. More symbols, this time larger, wrapping the walls like vines. At the far edge of the room, the tunnel narrowed again. Clay touched one of the carvings — a circle within a square, lines radiating like a sun without warmth. The stone was soft. Almost wet. He pulled his hand back and wiped it on his fatigues.

No one asked what the place was. No one gave it a name.

They kept moving, slower now, as if the earth was thickening around them. Wilkins stopped singing. Manson began to breathe through his mouth, shallow, like the air was too heavy to swallow.

When they finally stopped for rest, Clay reached for his journal, the one he'd written in since '55 — names, dates, fragments, codewords, deaths.

He opened it. Then closed it. Didn't write. Didn't even try.

He set it down on the stone beside him, pages open to a blank sheet, and left it there like an offering. The others watched but said nothing.

They found Wilkins standing alone at the edge of a side chamber that hadn't been there when they passed it the first time. The tunnel bent wrong there — not sharply, not clean, just enough to shift the angle of sight so distance felt unreliable. The air was warmer, thick enough to taste. Clay raised his hand, fist tight, and the column halted. Wilkins didn't turn when they called his name. He stood straight, arms loose at his sides, head tilted slightly back, staring into the dark like he was watching something hold its breath.

"What do you see?" Harlow whispered.

Wilkins answered without moving his mouth. "It's full of dead civilians," he said. "Who killed them ?."

The light wavered.

"Don't look at it too long," Manson muttered. His voice shook. "Feels like it's lookin' back through me."

Criggs lifted his rifle, then lowered it.

Wilkins stepped forward once. Just once. Wilkins's shoulders relaxed. "It's not us," he said. "That´s what counts." He turned his head slightly toward Clay, eyes wide and calm. "It's been here a decade."

Clay felt the ground vibrate — not a tremor, not sound. Pressure. Like something exhaling deep below. He grabbed Wilkins by the webbing and pulled him back hard. “We’re moving,” he said. “Now.”

Wilkins resisted for half a second, then let himself be dragged. He didn’t fight. He didn’t protest. He just kept his eyes fixed on the dark until the bend swallowed the chamber and the bodies with it. No one spoke after that. They didn’t check their backs. They didn’t count steps.

They lost Wilkins two hours later.

No sound. No warning. Just one moment he was there, humming softly behind Manson, and the next the space was empty. Clay spun, light flaring. The tunnel behind them was clear. No footprints. No disturbance. The stone floor lay smooth and untouched, like it had never held a man at all.

They searched for ten minutes. Then five more. Then stopped.

Clay marked the spot with nothing.

They went on without him.

Three days later, Wilkins walked back into camp from the jungle at dusk, clothes torn, feet bare, skin slick with something that wasn’t sweat. His eyes were clearer than they’d ever been. He breathed slow and deep, chest barely moving, like air was optional now.

Clay stood and faced him. “Where’d you go?”

Wilkins smiled, small and private. “Down,” he said. “Sideways too.” He touched his throat gently, like feeling for a pulse that wasn’t there anymore. “It taught me to think different.”

“What did?” Manson asked.

Wilkins looked past them, toward the place where the earth sagged inward and whispered. “The dead ones,” he said.

No one asked anything else.

Criggs did it at dusk, when the light thinned and the jungle leaned closer, when everything already felt flammable. He didn’t shout first. Didn’t warn. Just poured Sterno down his trousers like a man dousing a rag, hands steady, jaw clenched hard enough to show bone. Clay saw the glint too late. By the time he opened his mouth,

the flame was already there — blue at first, then orange, licking up Criggs's legs, chewing cloth and skin with the same hunger.

Criggs screamed then. Not words at first. Just sound, raw and ripping, loud enough to send birds out of the canopy in a black rush. He fell backward, hands clawing at the ground, boots kicking, fire climbing. "It's in me!" he howled. "Get it out! It's in my fuckin' blood!" The smell hit — burned hair, burned meat, something sweeter underneath that turned the stomach. The jungle did not move.

Harlow stood a few feet away, unmoving, grenades heavy under his shirt, eyes flat. He watched like he was observing weather. Clay shouted his name once. Harlow didn't answer. He didn't step forward. He didn't step back. Just stood there while Criggs thrashed and screamed and tried to tear his own legs off.

Manson was the one who moved.

He grabbed dirt with both hands — red clay, wet and thick — and threw it onto the flames. Not water. Not a blanket. Dirt. He kept shoveling it on, scooping with his bare hands, packing it down hard against Criggs's legs, smothering the fire the way you bury something that won't stay dead. Steam rose. Criggs's screams broke into choking sobs, then into thin, animal sounds that didn't form words anymore.

"Hold him," Manson shouted.

No one did.

So Manson did it alone, knees in the mud, pressing the earth into Criggs's burns until the fire finally died, leaving only smoke and the wet, cooked smell of ruined flesh. Criggs lay still at last, chest hitching, eyes rolled back so only the whites showed. The tally-marked boot heel was gone. Melted. Curled in on itself like a dead insect.

When it was over, Harlow turned away without a word.

Clay knelt beside Criggs, hands hovering uselessly over what was left of his legs. Skin sloughed where the fabric had fused. Blisters already rising, clear and trembling. Criggs's eyes fluttered open. He looked at Clay and whispered, "You saw it too. Didn't you?" Clay didn't answer. Criggs nodded like that was confirmation enough.

That night, no one slept. The fire pit stayed cold. Wilkins sat cross-legged near Criggs, breathing slow and deep, eyes shining in the dark. "It doesn't like being trapped," he said softly. "Fire makes it move."

Manson washed his hands in the dirt until they bled.

The jungle creaked once, long and low, like something settling deeper into a chair it had chosen a long time ago.

They came out of the earth like roots pushed backward — slow, quiet, covered in stone dust and sweat, blinking against a sky that didn't look the same. No orders. No plan. Just the faint breath of fresh rot pulling them upward, until the narrow tunnel spat them into lightless green. Clay was first. He pulled himself through the split earth, boots slipping on moss that hadn't been there when they went in. His fingers scraped bark that pulsed faintly with warmth.

One by one, the others followed. Manson's face was streaked with something that wasn't mud. Wilkins emerged last, not winded, not blinking, like he'd known exactly when and where the exit would be. Criggs was carried — unconscious, legs wrapped in gauze, face waxy. They laid him in the shadow of a twisted tree, its trunk bent like a question mark, leaves shaped like teeth. No one recognized the place. It should've been familiar. It wasn't.

The jungle was wrong.

Trees that used to be broad now narrowed into high columns. Or maybe they had always been thin. The underbrush grew silent — no birdcalls, no insect rhythm. Even the wind had a weight to it, low and slow, moving across the skin like breath instead of breeze.

Clay checked his watch. It ticked.

He looked up, expecting light.

Nothing. The sun didn't rise.

Not that day. Not the one after.

A fog hung low, faintly glowing like it was lit from within by something deep underground. When they tried to build a fire, the smoke curled in place, refusing to rise. Harlow placed a leaf on the forest floor and watched it stay where it landed, unmoved by any draft. Manson said, "It's like we went sideways." No one argued.

They kept watches by guesswork. Took shifts that didn't align. Time became rhythm, not number.

Wilkins sat with his hands pressed into the earth, whispering things none of them tried to translate. Clay stood at the edge of a small clearing and stared upward for

hours, waiting for light that didn't come. He stopped expecting it by the second night. There was a kind of peace in that.

On the third day, when the light finally returned, it came from the wrong direction. And no one was sure it was the same sun.

The Signal That Shouldn't Be

The radio hadn't worked in months, maybe longer. It hissed when it had power, whispered static like breath through broken teeth, sometimes picked up fragments of Hanoi Hannah or French love songs twisted by jungle bounce. But that morning, just before first meal — cold rice and something moving in the meat tin — it came alive.

First a pop, sharp and wet, then a voice. Clearer than any of them had heard since '68. Not local. Not foreign. American. Male.

"Platoon Echo-Four," the voice said. "This is Lieutenant Morrow. Come in."

Criggs jerked awake, eyes wide, then winced — what remained of his legs twitching under gauze that stank of old meat and earth. Manson dropped his tin. Wilkins lifted his head and whispered, "He's dead."

Clay was already crouched over the set, adjusting the dials slow and careful like it might break under touch. "Repeat," he said. "Identify."

Static again, then the voice returned, exactly the same, no stutter, no shift in tone. "This is Lieutenant Morrow. Echo-Four, respond. Coordinates incoming. Cave entrance. North ridge outside Da Nang. Safe point. Repeat: safe point. All doors open."

Harlow turned slowly, eyes narrow. "Morrow burned in that jeep hit west of the Trang Bang road. I was there. I smelled him."

Clay didn't answer. His hand hovered over the dial. The coordinates came through next — spoken, not clicked. Precise. North slope, eight clicks from Da Nang's outer edge. Near a range of limestone outcroppings they'd never mapped. Manson muttered something about the jungle shifting terrain again. Criggs started laughing until blood trickled from the side of his mouth.

Wilkins leaned in toward the speaker, eyes half-lidded. “It’s not Morrow,” he said. “It just knows how to wear his skin.”

Clay clicked the set off.

But the coordinates stayed.

In the dirt, in the silence, in the ache of knowing they had nowhere else to go.

By sundown, they were moving north. Not by orders. Not by map. Just by the voice, and the cold math of curiosity that comes after death has already found you once.

The jungle opened in places it hadn’t before.

And somewhere ahead, just out of reach, a voice waited. Clean, calm, impossibly intact.

Clay didn’t look back. Neither did the others. They followed the lie with the same obedience they once gave the truth.

That night, camped in a narrow ravine choked with wet ferns and the sharp stink of mold, Clay’s sleep unraveled like thread pulled from a wound. No heat, no gunfire, no screaming—just silence, smooth and full, the kind that holds too much behind it. He stood in a field he didn’t recognize, boots sinking not into mud but ash, light bent around him like water. He looked down and saw insects moving beneath his feet. Not crawling. Reversing.

Ants walked backward up stalks. A moth unburned itself from a match head, wings reforming as smoke folded into wood. A dead hornet lifted gently from the dirt, straightened its legs, and buzzed back into the air like nothing had happened. Time bled in reverse, slow and smooth, undoing itself with no sound.

He turned and saw his men younger than they’d been in years. Harlow without his tattoos. Criggs without scars. Wilkins still clean-eyed and laughing. Guerrero before the drugs, before the blank stare, before the jungle taught him new rules. They walked past him, not seeing him, rifles held wrong, boots without mud. A rewind of every loss, every inch taken — as if the war was sucking itself back into the earth.

He woke with dirt under his fingernails and the taste of ashes in his mouth.

Harlow was sitting watch. Not facing out, but down.

There was a centipede beside his boot, long as a belt and glassy in the torchlight. Harlow didn’t blink. Didn’t move. Just stared.

It was moving backward.

Not like crawling in reverse — but truly undoing itself. Its legs lifted and unlifted, mandibles retracting into clean sockets, its crushed midsection re-knitting before their eyes. It had been stepped on earlier that day, Clay remembered. He'd seen it twitch and curl inward, dead. Now it uncurled. Straightened. Blinked twin dots that didn't look like eyes.

Harlow said, without turning, "Time's not right here. Not anymore."

Clay didn't answer.

The stars above were in the wrong place. The moss on the rocks had grown upward since last night. He felt his pulse beat not in his chest, but somewhere behind his teeth.

Wilkins murmured something in his sleep that made Manson shift closer to his rifle.

Clay closed his eyes again.

The insects were still moving backward in the dark.

The cave sat where the coordinates said it would, but the land didn't match any memory, any map. The trees thinned too quickly near the entrance, as if something

beneath had pulled their roots out years ago. Vines curled away from the stone, not over it. The mouth gaped wide and low, half-covered in moss that looked burned, as though it had once caught fire from inside. The light at the entrance bent slightly — not much, but enough that their shadows leaned the wrong direction when they approached.

Clay stepped in first. His boots sank slightly, not in mud, but in something finer — ash, or dried moss ground into dust. The smell hit at once. Sharp, acrid, not decay. Something like old copper mixed with soap and ozone. It tightened behind the eyes. Criggs hissed and covered his mouth. Manson gagged.

They walked in slow. Ten paces. Twenty. No light inside except what the torches cast. The walls seemed to absorb it, dull stone that didn't shine or reflect. Just swallowed. Their footfalls echoed.

Once. Then again.

Then again.

Too many times.

It wasn't just echo. The sound bounced wrong, came back shifted, as if someone else was walking a second behind them. Manson spun around, rifle raised. Nothing. Just the darkness, and the feeling of having been seen.

He stopped cold. Leaned on the wall. Then doubled over and vomited.

Not food. Not bile.

Thick, green-black sludge hit the cave floor, hissed when it touched the stone. He wiped his mouth, eyes wide, hands shaking. "Wrong dirt," he said. "This isn't ground. It's a mouth."

Harlow didn't speak. Just raised his light and swept it across the floor. The dust clung too thick. Too uniform. Clay realized he hadn't heard a single insect since they entered. Not one.

Wilkins crouched beside a wall, tracing something with his fingers. A pattern that didn't stay still. "It's older than the war," he whispered. "Older than war as a word."

Clay stepped deeper in, light casting long angles. The cave didn't feel like it had an end.

Only depth.

The voices began near the back wall — faint, mechanical, rising slow through the stillness like breath forced through a coil of wire. At first Clay thought it was echo again, a trick of sound ricocheting off the smooth stone. But then he heard names. His own. Manson's. Operations they hadn't spoken of in months. Checkpoints, coordinates, enemy sightings. Wilkins's call signs. The exact words they'd once transmitted on hot nights, half-whispered into radios caked in blood and oil.

Word for word. Perfect cadence. No static.

Manson froze mid-step. "That's mine," he said. "Delta Sweep. Route Echo-12." His voice cracked. "That was March."

"Mine too," Harlow said. "Tet. Sniper report."

Then Wilkins tilted his head toward the wall and began to recite, matching the voice exactly: "—point red six. Unknown movement at two-hundred yards. Heat bloom confirmed. Requesting aerial sweep."

"That's from Firebase Trinity," Clay said. "That was... '66."

They hadn't transmitted anything in weeks. Maybe longer. The last working set had gone silent underground. Clay turned toward the pack where it was strapped, knelt, and ripped the radio out. It buzzed faintly, no lights, no signal. He slammed it to the ground. Once. Twice. The casing cracked. He kicked it against the wall, the pieces scattering across the dust like dead birds.

The cave didn't notice. The voices kept coming. Different now. Not only transmissions.

Whispers. Laughter. Footsteps too light for boots. Breathing patterns they all knew — each man recognizing the others by their sleep rhythm, by the way they coughed or sighed when the jungle weighed too hard on their lungs. They were hearing themselves.

Clay bent over the shattered remains of the radio. Something inside pulsed faintly — not electricity. Heat. A dull, wet warmth. He reached for it, then stopped.

Wilkins stepped past him and said, "It's not repeating. It's remembering."

Manson backed toward the wall. "There's no speaker left," he said. "Why can I still hear it?"

The voices continued — now layered, blending, too many at once. Some were foreign. Some sounded like men they'd buried years ago. One of them spoke Clay's name in his mother's voice.

Harlow drew his knife and cut a deep line across his forearm, not as an offering, but to see if it would echo back.

It didn't.

But something laughed softly from the shadows.

The night didn't fall inside the cave—it thickened. The deeper they moved, the less the idea of time mattered. Watches stopped ticking. Breath hung longer in the air. No wind. No echoes now, either. Just the hush of stone pressing close around them like a throat deciding whether to swallow. Clay took point. Manson muttered to himself. Harlow checked the light every three steps. Criggs stopped speaking altogether, eyes wide and blank. Boone slid down against the stone wall, eyes glassy as the LSD took hold, tracing patterns in the rock that weren't there a moment ago. Latham knelt nearby in the flickering flashlight glow, the ketamine settling in slow — he smiled at nothing, then whispered, "I think the cave's breathing."

Buckshot was quiet too, but not in the same way.

He'd walked behind Wilkins for most of the day's crawl. Never asked for water. Never sat when they paused. Just walked. He looked thinner than before — not starved, but peeled, like something had been taken from beneath the skin. Clay had noticed his eyes were darker. Less light behind them. But in this place, that didn't stand out.

They stopped in a hollow shaped like a dome, low-ceilinged, with a floor that crunched underfoot — not bone, not stone. Something older. Clay raised a hand. "Rest here."

They set down packs without speaking. Manson rubbed his temples. Wilkins drew spirals in the dust again, watching the lines rise and settle. Harlow stood watch, motionless.

When Clay turned to count them — the habit still remained, even when the numbers no longer stayed right — Buckshot wasn't there.

No one had seen him leave.

"Three seconds ago," Manson whispered. "He was right here."

Clay scanned the ground. No prints. No disturbance. Just a flat patch near where Buckshot had stood, the dust perfectly smooth. Then something shifted on his chest — soft, light.

He looked down.

There it lay.

A tongue.

Whole. Pink. Clean. No blood. No signs of tearing or trauma. Just placed there, gently, like a leaf or a gift, resting against the canvas of his flak jacket. The taste buds faced up. The muscle curved slightly, relaxed.

Clay stared at it for too long.

Wilkins leaned over, eyes unfocused, and said, “He won’t need it anymore. Not where he's gone.”

Criggs looked like he might scream but didn’t. Manson took a step back and wouldn’t come forward again.

Clay picked it up slowly between two fingers. It was warm.

He wrapped it in a rag and tucked it into the pouch where his cigarettes used to be.

No one asked why.

The cave seemed satisfied.

What Eats the Silence

They moved through the day like ghosts in a world already emptied. No orders. No objectives. Just the slow motion of habit, of what they’d always done: patrol, sweep, check perimeters that no longer existed. The maps were ash. The radio spoke only with dead voices. The jungle no longer grew toward them — it grew around them. Villages once marked by smoke now bore no sound at all. No chickens. No flies. No cries. The ground didn’t smell of people. Just of old water and thick vines fattened on time.

Binh Loc was gone. The old woman who once prayed under a net—gone. The bunkers—cracked open like ribcages. In one spot, a well had filled with tiny white

bones, none longer than a man's finger. Manson leaned over, stared for a full minute, then walked away without a word. They didn't mark the location.

North of Da Nang, in a cluster of structures built from concrete and tin, they found the Americans.

Seated at tables.

Seven of them, in full uniform, helmets on, boots laced, as if waiting for a meal. Plates on the tables. Cups too. All filled. One had a fork lifted halfway to his mouth, hand frozen mid-motion. Their rifles rested upright beside them, barrels cleaned, bolts drawn back. No wounds. No rot. No insects crawling on their skin. No smell of death. Just... paused.

Wilkins stepped forward, crouched beside one.

"Eyes open," he said. "Still moist."

Criggs refused to enter the building.

Clay walked among them slowly, counting. The air was still. The silence in the room pressed against the ears like water. Harlow leaned close to one of the corpses and whispered, "What day is it?" No reply. The corpse's chest didn't rise. But its eyes moved slightly. Left, then center again.

Harlow stepped back, hard.

"They're not dead," Manson said. "They're holding still. So still even time forgot them."

The plates were warm.

The cups steamed faintly.

Clay reached for the radio hanging limp at the nearest one's belt. It turned on the moment his fingers brushed it.

A voice came through. Morrow's again.

"Stay seated," it said. "Help is en route. Do not blink."

Clay turned it off.

They left the building in silence.

No one looked back.

The bones came from the well first — the ones Manson had looked at and left behind. But Harlow went back in the night, barefoot and silent. By morning, they found him at the clearing's edge, kneeling in the red mud, elbows deep in a pile of the tiny white remains. Not frantic. Not manic. Methodical. He'd arranged them in a circle, with taller bones rising like teeth at each quarter, the shorter ones stacked tight like ribs, like lattice. No twine. No rope. Just balance and instinct, the way animals build without blueprints.

Clay approached without speaking. Watched for a while.

Harlow didn't glance up. His shirt was soaked through. He placed the last femur carefully across two notched vertebrae, then sat back on his heels.

"It keeps the heat out," he said. "Or maybe it keeps the heat in."

"What heat?" Clay asked.

Harlow looked skyward, though there was no sun. Only gray, thick and wet, like sky putrefied. "The kind that chews from inside. The kind that melts your name before your skin."

The shrine was wrong in proportion. Too tall in some places, too narrow in others. Yet it stood without wobbling. The center was a pit Harlow had dug by hand, no more than a foot deep, lined with jawbones. When the wind moved — if it was wind — the bones clicked softly against each other, like they were whispering teeth.

Manson watched from the edge of camp, arms crossed tight. "That's bad medicine," he said. "Even for here."

"No medicine here," Wilkins replied. "Just gravity, and what feeds it."

Criggs crawled toward the shrine on hands and elbows and curled beside it like a dog seeking warmth, his bandaged legs dragging behind. He slept first. Deep. No tremors. No muttering. Peace like a fever breaking.

One by one, the rest followed.

They didn't lay out bedrolls. They just dropped, boots still on, rifles cradled close, breath slowing in unison. The shrine stood at the center, the bones humming faintly now, a sound you didn't hear in your ears but behind your eyes, where dreams start to form.

Clay lay last, one arm still on his rifle, the other resting across his chest.

He didn’t sleep. Not fully. But he didn’t move either.

By morning, none of them remembered lying down. But all of them remembered warmth. Not fire. Not light.

Something older.

The heat Harlow had spoken of was gone. For now.

The ash came from the fire they hadn’t built.

It smoldered in a ring they didn’t remember setting, outside the circle of bone and whisper. Pale gray and soft as skin dust, heaped in a perfect spiral that hadn’t been there the night before. Wilkins was the first to reach into it. No hesitation. He dipped two fingers in, drew a line straight down from his hairline to his chin, splitting his face like a mask broken clean. Then two quick slashes across the cheeks. He moved slow, with a kind of reverence, like painting something buried under his own skin.

Clay watched in silence.

Criggs stirred from where he lay near the shrine, eyes still distant. Wilkins moved to him next. Without asking, he marked his face too. Criggs didn’t blink. The ash smeared over old scars and sweat, settled into every crack like memory returning.

“We are not prey,” Wilkins whispered as he moved from man to man. “Not meat. Not worms. Not offerings.”

He came to Manson last. Manson didn’t resist, but didn’t help either. He sat with leaves cupped in both hands, sorting them like poker cards. Not jungle leaves — not ones nearby, anyway. These were small, waxy, and a deep red, like they’d grown on something with blood inside. He ate them slow, chewing each one forty times, counting under his breath.

Clay said, “You sick?”

Manson didn’t answer. Just plucked another leaf from his pocket and placed it gently on his tongue. Swallowed. “Meat’s wrong,” he murmured. “All meat’s spoiled. Plants don’t lie.”

Harlow paced the perimeter, ash already flaking off his cheeks. He didn’t speak. Didn’t sleep. Just walked the edge of the shrine’s radius like a dog keeping wolves at bay.

Wilkins returned to Clay, dipped his fingers again, and raised them toward Clay's face. Clay let him. The ash was cold, not from temperature, but from something deeper — a kind of cold that made the bones under the skin stiffen.

"We aren't being hunted anymore," Wilkins said. "We're being watched. Big difference."

Clay said, "By what?"

Wilkins smiled, faint and cracked. "By the part of the jungle that doesn't move. The part that waits."

They wore the ash until the next rain — but that didn't come.

Not for a long time.

The storm came out of nowhere, ripping the sky open with white seams of light and thunder so close it felt like the ground was splitting underneath them. Rain hammered down in sheets, washing ash from faces and bone dust from the shrine, turning the clearing into a slick of red and gray. The jungle leaned and writhed, branches snapping, leaves screaming as if something large were forcing its way through them without caring what broke.

Criggs started laughing.

At first it sounded like the old laugh — short, sharp, ugly — but it stretched too long, ran out of breath and kept going anyway. He sat up under the poncho, rain pouring over his face, hands pressed hard against his eyes. "Too much light," he kept saying. "Jesus Christ, it's everywhere. Inside too." Lightning split the sky again, close enough to leave white ghosts burned behind the eyelids. Criggs screamed, a raw sound torn straight out of his chest, and drove his thumbs in.

No one reached him.

They heard the wet give. The sound of something soft tearing that shouldn't tear. Blood poured out fast, black in the rain, running down his cheeks and neck and pooling in the mud beneath him. He rocked back and forth, hands red, laughing and crying tangled together. "Too much seeing," he gasped. "Can't turn it off. Can't blink it away."

Harlow stood a few feet off, rain plastering his hair to his skull, face blank. Manson took one step forward, then stopped. Wilkins watched with his head tilted, eyes bright in the flashes of lightning. Clay felt his hands clench and didn't move them.

When Criggs finally went still, it wasn't because he'd passed out. He lay there breathing, slow and deep, blood still leaking from where his eyes had been, rain washing it thin. Manson dragged the tarp over him, careful, almost tender, tucking the edges under like he was making a bed. No one said a word.

They left him there.

The storm broke near dawn. The rain eased into a steady drip, thunder rolling farther away like something losing interest. Clay took first watch, rifle across his knees, eyes fixed on the dark shape of the tarp.

It moved.

Not with wind. The night was still. The tarp lifted slightly, then settled. Lifted again, slower this time, like something beneath it was testing the weight. Clay's fingers tightened on the stock. Harlow shifted his stance but didn't step forward. Manson held his breath so hard his chest ached.

The tarp rose a third time, higher now, stretching from underneath as if pushed by hands that didn't know the shape of fabric. Then it dropped flat again, perfectly still.

No sound came from beneath it.

When morning light finally filtered weakly through the canopy, the tarp lay smooth and unmoving. They did not uncover it. They packed in silence and moved on, leaving Criggs behind with the bones and the ash and whatever had learned how to breathe under cloth in the dark.

It was near a creek with no sound. Not even the water made noise — it just moved, slow and dark, sliding over stones slick with green. They stopped there to rest, but no one sat. The air pressed too hard against the ribs. The birds hadn't returned. Even the sky seemed unsure how much light it was allowed to let through.

Clay knelt by the waterline without a word, fingers numb as he unfastened the leather cords, tags clinking softly as he worked. Thirty-five once. He counted twenty-seven now. The rest were already gone, lost with the men or taken by the jungle or simply… never issued again. Names etched in steel, dulled by blood and sweat and years. Some still had bits of bootlace or flesh stuck in the chains. He didn't clean them.

He dug with his hands. No shovel. Just the earth and his fingers, fingernails bending backward, mud grinding into the cuts. The hole was shallow — a foot, maybe less —

but it was enough. He placed the tags in slowly, not all at once. Each one dropped with a faint click against the others. Some stuck together. Some slid away like they knew better.

When he was done, he pressed the dirt back over the pile and packed it tight with his palms. No cross. No stones. No mark at all.

Just soil.

The jungle already greened over the edges, vines curling as if to seal the place.

Wilkins crouched beside him, watching with a stillness that didn't feel like grief. More like recognition. When Clay stood and wiped his hands on his fatigues, Wilkins spoke softly, eyes not on the ground but the trees.

"The jungle remembers where."

No one asked what he meant.

Harlow checked his rifle. Manson wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist and stared into the water. The creek didn't ripple. Even the insects kept away. Only the faint smell of old copper and rain remained.

They moved on in silence, lighter now in weight, but not in mind. Behind them, the earth settled over names no one would call out again.

The crack of a branch stopped everything.

Wilkins froze mid-step, hand up, head cocked slightly like an animal listening for thunder. The others barely had time to react before it came — a thunk through the air, heavy and wrong. Something metallic. Then Clay's voice, raw and sharp: "Grenade!"

The thing hit mud just left of the column and bounced once.

Clay lunged, arms wide, shoulder slamming into Griggs to shove him back. The blast came a heartbeat later — a brutal punch of fire and shrapnel that lifted one man off his feet and sent two more rolling through the dirt screaming, legs sheared to bone.

Then the jungle lit up.

VC shapes burst from the green — from trees, holes, roots, the very earth. Muzzle flashes cracked in every direction. Clay hit the ground, rolled, came up firing. The others opened up without thinking — rifles snapping full-auto, tracers ripping orange

through the ferns. Smoke poured from barrels as machine guns tore into the trees. The roar was thunder in a bottle. M60 screamed, bullets chewing a VC in half — torso gone, legs folding backward into a twitching heap. A soldier next to him stood just long enough to catch a round through the forehead. His head opened like rotten fruit, body falling on its knees before it knew it was dead.

Manson was already in the mud, crawling, firing from the elbow. Harlow stood in place, stock pressed to cheek, squeezing off rounds with eerie calm. Boone vanished in the blast — just pieces where he'd stood, red fog and meat.

A VC leapt from a low branch with a machete, screaming. Latham caught him mid-air, knife to belly, twisting until the blade snapped inside. They both fell, bleeding into each other. Another soldier grappled with a small, fast VC in the brush — the enemy drove a sharpened stick into the man's thigh before getting his neck snapped by Clay's boot.

To the right, one soldier stumbled into a bamboo whip trap — a spring-loaded arm with spikes lashed forward, punching through his ribcage from the side. He screamed once, then gargled blood and dropped. Two others tripped tripwires — one caught a spiked log swinging down and it crushed his skull into the tree like a ripe melon. The other's legs were shredded by a buried mine packed with jagged steel scrap.

Another dragged a wounded man behind a tree, only to catch two rounds in the chest. His mouth moved. No sound came. He died with his eyes open, looking straight up at nothing. A VC with a bayonet rushed Wilkins — who stepped aside, drew his own knife, and carved the man's throat open in one long arc without blinking.

Grenades burst through the leaves. One exploded beneath a kneeling man, flinging his arm clean off. Another crawled backward, intestines spilling from a gut wound, calling for his mother in a voice too small for the man he was. A VC emerged from the smoke with a revolver and fired point-blank into a soldier's temple. Blood sprayed the leaves like paint.

Then Criggs mowed the shooter down — ten rounds punching through the chest and out the spine, folding him backward over a root. Manson picked up a wounded soldier's rifle, used it to club a crouching VC, then stabbed another through the ear. Harlow dropped to a knee and took three clean shots — each one a kill.

Screaming gave way to moans, then to silence, except for fire crackling in the brush.

The fight lasted six minutes.

Eighteen platoon members lay dead or dying — most beyond help. Some moved, barely. Some didn't. Bodies sprawled in pieces. Limbs hanging from branches. Boot prints in blood. Twenty Vietcong lay around them — torn, crumpled, shredded, some still holding knives.

Smoke drifted low, refusing to rise.

Nine men remained.

The five — Criggs, Harlow, Manson, Wilkins, Clay — stood or crouched, chests heaving, soaked in blood not all their own.

Four more crawled from the wreckage, silent, not yet sure they were alive.

Orange Days, Blue Nights

By the time the heat returned, it wasn't from the sky.

The air was wrong again — still, but not dead. Just holding its breath. The leaves along the trail had taken on a brittle sheen, curling at the edges like they'd been ironed flat then singed. The vines clung too tight to the trees, bleeding sap the color

of tea. Somewhere to the west, something cracked like dry glass breaking under a boot.

That's when the skin started going.

First Manson, who didn't say anything at all, just stared at the back of his hands as they began to slough in long, thin peels. Then Wilkins, brushing strips from his forearms like old paper coming loose from the spine of a book. Criggs was already gone. The burns had claimed him years ago — he just hadn't known which layer to scream from.

Clay sat with his back to a termite mound, shirt half-off, watching the damage spread like rust through damp cloth.

Harlow stripped to the waist and let it happen.

His chest was red, blistered in places, skin cracking around the tattoos he didn't remember getting. The flesh peeled in slow ribbons, soft and pale underneath, like wet bark under sun-split tree. He caught a long strip curling from his shoulder, pulled it free with two fingers, and held it to his mouth.

Then licked it.

His tongue moved slow, deliberate. He didn't flinch. Didn't laugh. Just smiled, faint and crooked, the kind that doesn't reach the eyes. "This is the cost," he said, voice steady. "You stay long enough, the land starts charging rent."

Clay didn't answer.

The trees around them shifted slightly, not from wind, but something more rhythmic — like breath behind bark.

Manson rubbed ash over the peeling skin, muttering under his breath. Wilkins had gone silent again, kneeling by a fallen branch that bled clear when cut. Harlow licked another strip from his forearm, eyes closed.

They didn't talk about the chemicals anymore.

They didn't talk about what rained.

It had been raining orange for years, in mists, in fogs, in air thick enough to taste like metal.

Now it just lived under their skin.

Somewhere far off, a bird tried to cry. Its voice came out as a cough.

They woke to the sound of wire pulling tight.

No snap. No scream. Just the hush of tension held by branches, shaped by hands that no longer needed blueprints. Manson had been up before dawn, crouched in the wet grass with mud smeared across his cheekbones like warpaint, setting the traps in silence. Clay found him just after first light, crouched beside a deadfall made of sharpened stakes bound with vine, the entire thing aimed inward — toward their camp, not away.

“Thought we stopped with traps,” Clay said, voice hoarse.

Manson didn’t look up. “Didn’t stop. Just turned them around.”

The others stirred behind them, slow as moss growing. Harlow sat on a rotting log, skin still peeling, running a whetstone across his blade without watching. Wilkins wandered barefoot among the trees, humming softly, a tune no one else knew.

When he saw what Manson was doing, he laughed.

Not cruel. Not mad. Just a sound made of understanding.

“You think we’re the enemy now.”

Manson didn’t pause. Didn’t smile.

“Aren’t we?”

He tightened the last knot, stood slowly, and dusted his palms off on his fatigues. His eyes were sunken. His breath steady. The trap was perfect — clean, efficient, and clearly meant for something human-shaped to trigger from within.

Clay didn’t argue. Just stepped back.

Wilkins stepped between two of the traps and said, “You know it doesn’t matter where you aim them. Not anymore. Whatever wants us already lives here.”

Manson looked past him, toward the jungle.

“That’s fine,” he said. “I’m not aiming at it.”

Then he walked back into the trees, slow and careful, planting more wire in the soft loam where their footprints lingered.

Harlow finished sharpening his knife, tested the edge against his thumb, then whispered, “Hope I step in one.”

No one laughed.

In the evening Harlow and Clay sat on the ground with their backs close enough that neither leaned away. Wilkins picked at the dirt with a stick, slow circles, not looking at what he was making. Clay watched his hands instead of his face.

“Do you remember ’55,” Wilkins said. “Not the boat. Before that. The idea of it.”
Clay nodded. “I remember thinking it would give shape to things.”
Wilkins let out a breath that might have been a laugh. “I thought it would wake me up. I was numb before I got here. Didn’t know it then.” He stopped moving the stick. “Now I don’t feel anything at all.”

Clay shifted, knees drawn up. “I remember the first body I saw. Not here. Training. They brought us to see one, like it was a lesson.”
“Did it work?”
“No.” Clay rubbed his palms together. “Bodies don’t teach. They just stay.”

Wilkins stared at the ground. “I see them all the time. Dead people. Not ghosts. Just bodies. Open, closed, burned, folded wrong. I look at them and there’s nothing in me. No fear. No anger. Just weight.” He pressed his thumb into the dirt until it left a white mark. “Feels like I’m already on the other side, looking back.”

Clay didn’t answer right away. When he spoke, his voice was flat. “I don’t think there is an other side.”
Wilkins turned his head slightly.
“I think this is it,” Clay said. “And it doesn’t add up. Whatever meaning people talk about, I don’t see it anymore. Feels like it burned off somewhere along the way.” He paused. “If I died tomorrow, it wouldn’t change anything. Not here. Not anywhere.”

Wilkins nodded slowly. “That’s what I mean. When I say I’m dead. I don’t mean my body stopped. I mean the part that cared about staying.”
Clay looked at him then. “You scared?”
Wilkins shook his head. “No. That’s the problem.”

They sat without speaking for a while, the stick forgotten between Wilkins’s fingers, Clay’s gaze fixed on nothing in particular, both of them breathing like men who had already practiced the end.

“I used to think dying would mean something,” Wilkins said, voice low, almost just vibration. “Like maybe someone would remember, or it’d be for a reason. Hold a line, save a guy, carry a flag. Something.” He drew a slow line in the dirt. “But most of the ones I’ve seen just blink and drop. No last words. No music. No cause.”

Clay scraped mud from his boot heel with a rock. “Back then we thought dying was part of a story,” he said. “Now it’s just part of the ground. Like it folds you in and that’s it.” He paused. “My first squad leader. Took a round in the stomach. Laid there for an hour. Told me to write his wife. I never did.”

Wilkins didn’t respond to that. He looked at his hands, turning them palm-up. “Feels like we’ve been given a thousand deaths and not one of them made us feel alive.”

Clay grunted. “I don’t think I’ve felt alive since sixty, maybe before. I don’t remember what it feels like. Breathing doesn’t count.” He looked up, not at anything. “I used to imagine going home. I don’t anymore. Not because I don’t want to — I just don’t believe there’s anything there that would want me back.”

Wilkins said, “I saw a mirror in a house once. Back when we were still near villages. I looked in and I didn’t recognize the face. Not just aged. Different. Like something climbed into me and pushed the rest out.”

“I know that face,” Clay said. “It’s the one I shave when I bother to. It doesn’t blink when I do.”

They sat quiet again, the space between their bodies filled with nothing but their presence. Then Wilkins said, “If I disappear tonight, don’t look for me.”

Clay didn’t hesitate. “I wouldn’t.”

Wilkins nodded once, slowly. “Thanks.”

Clay let out a dry breath, not quite a laugh. “You know we’re the only crazy retards still here since ’55, right?” he said, eyes half-lidded. “Everyone else either got out, got smart, or got buried.” He looked over at Wilkins, mouth flat. “We stayed. Like dumb ghosts too stubborn to lie down.”

They didn’t say anything else. There was nothing more to say that hadn’t already died in them long ago.

They slept that night with the traps fully set.

It appeared at dawn, between veils of fog that didn't burn off. A rise in the jungle, flattened and cleared too neatly, too recent — not like the ruins they'd passed, not half-eaten by vines or ghosts. Razor wire coiled tight and shining. Sandbags dry. The air smelled of hot oil and canvas and cigarettes. The sign at the gate read: FIREBASE JULIET. Clay didn't remember that name on any of the old maps. None of them did.

The gate stood open. They entered with weapons loose but ready, eyes dragging over every corner like expecting the place to exhale.

No bodies. No sounds. Then the clink of ceramic.

On a folding table just beyond the bunkhouse — five white mugs, steam curling up faint and perfect from black coffee, freshly poured. No movement. No noise.

Clay picked one up. It was hot.

Not warm — hot.

Inside the comms hut, the radio was on. Not static. Not ghost signals. Just music, soft and smooth, a saxophone curling lazy over a heartbeat drum.

Miles Davis. *Blue in Green.*

The tape spun clean, no scratches, no warble.

Wilkins stepped in behind him and closed his eyes. "It's from his '59 sessions," he said softly, as if remembering a childhood he'd never had.

Harlow picked up a clipboard near the armory — all the logs were empty. No names. No supply entries. Just pages of dates, looping endlessly, with a single note scribbled in red: *STAY SEATED. THE SKY IS LISTENING.*

Manson opened a footlocker. Inside: MREs still sealed, folded uniforms, boots lined up like they'd just been taken off the hour before.

No sign of anyone.

No rot. No sound of retreat. No scuff marks, no drag lines, no blood.

Just the feeling that the place had exhaled its men in the night and waited for new ones to inhale it.

Criggs — or what was left of him — stared into the coffee but didn't touch it.

Clay sat down at the table.

The mug steamed between his hands.

Miles Davis kept playing.

Outside, the jungle pressed up against the wire but did not cross. Not yet.

He was one of the quiet ones. No name left among them, just a face and the way he walked — always lagging behind half a step, rifle loose in hand, never quite looking anyone in the eye. The fog hadn't lifted in two days, and the music still played low from the comms hut. Miles looping again, notes so slow they felt like breath underwater.

He stood near the bunker's edge, shirt off, chest heaving like he'd just run a mile, though no one had moved in hours. Skin gone the color of smoked glass. His eyes were rimmed in yellow. Sweat poured from his hairline, down his spine, soaking the waistband of his pants. He tried to speak, then staggered.

Clay saw it — the hitch in his step, the way his knees buckled like wet rope. He didn't move.

The soldier fell hard, face-first into the dirt, fingers clawing once, then curling under like they were ashamed. No shout. No struggle. Just that collapse, that folding-in of something already halfway rotted from the inside.

His body twitched once.

Then stopped.

Wilkins stepped closer, crouched beside the corpse, and placed a hand over the chest. No breath. No movement.

"Heart," he said, not looking up. "Stopped trying."

Manson knelt next, rolled the body gently onto its back. The man's veins were black under the skin, swollen like worms. A faint chemical stench rose — sharp, sweet, metallic.

"Agent Orange," Manson muttered. "Too much, too long. It cooks you slow."

Clay stood over them, unmoving.

He didn't blink.

The steam from the nearby mugs still curled upward, thin and fragile. The music shifted to the opening notes of *All Blues.* No one reached for the coffee now.

Harlow turned away and whispered something into the radio, though it wasn't plugged in anymore.

They didn't bury the body.

They just left it where it fell.

By nightfall, it had started to sink into the ground. No blood. Just weight and silence.

The music didn't come from the firebase.

Clay noticed it when he stepped past the wire, following a pull he didn't question anymore. The jungle was still, leaves hanging heavy and damp, branches bent inward like ribs. Somewhere ahead, between trunks that leaned too close together, a sound stretched itself thin.

A note.

Low. Dragged out so long it stopped being a note and became pressure.

Clay froze. Listened.

Another note followed. Higher. Slow enough that the first hadn't finished dying before the second began. The melody took shape only after several minutes, each tone so extended it felt like time itself was being pulled apart and laid flat.

The Star-Spangled Banner.

He recognized it without wanting to. The shape of it. The climb. The ache. But slowed until each note took nearly a minute to complete, the spaces between them filled with wind that didn't move anything. No instruments. No voice. Just the jungle breathing the anthem through leaves and hollow trunks, like it had learned it by listening to radios long ago and never forgot.

Clay stood there and didn't salute. Didn't move. He felt the sound in his teeth, in the space behind his eyes, vibrating slow enough to bruise.

Behind him, Wilkins coughed.

Once. Sharp. Wet.

Then again — deeper, tearing. Wilkins doubled over, hand pressed to his mouth. When he pulled it away, his palm was red and slick, blood catching in the lines like paint poured too thick. He smiled faintly at it, like it was an old friend finally keeping a promise.

“Too much song,” he whispered. “Too much remembering.”

Manson reached for him. Wilkins waved him off and sank to his knees, coughing again, blood spotting the ash still clinging to his cheeks. The music dragged on, one unbearable note after another, the anthem stretched into something funereal and endless, a flag lowered inch by inch into the earth.

Clay didn’t look away from the trees.

When the final note finally died — not ended, just thinned until it wasn’t sound anymore — the jungle exhaled. Leaves rustled once. Then stillness returned, heavier than before.

Wilkins wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stood, unsteady but smiling. “They taught it to sing,” he said softly. “Or it taught itself.”

Clay turned back toward camp. The firebase stood unchanged. The coffee had gone cold. The tape had run out, the reel clicking uselessly in place.

But the melody stayed with him.

Slow.

Endless.

Still playing somewhere the war had never stopped listening.

Fog Like Milk

The fog arrived without rain. It rolled in thick and pale, not gray but white — dense like milk gone sour, clinging to everything, swallowing sound and time in equal parts. By the second day, they couldn’t see the tops of the trees. By the fourth, they couldn’t see each other without calling names first. After a week, they stopped calling.

No birds. No insects. Even the smell of the jungle faded, replaced by the wet neutrality of the fog, as if the land had been boiled clean.

Shapes began to appear on the fifth day.

At first, they flickered like heat mirages — tall and human-shaped, moving just at the edge of visibility, out past the rifle sights. Not Viet Cong. Not friendly. Just tall, thin

figures that didn't make footsteps, didn't break branches. Sometimes they stood still. Sometimes they swayed.

Clay saw one near the latrine pit. No weapon, no face. Just a silhouette turned sideways, half-turned back toward the trees as if waiting for something to catch up. It vanished when he blinked. Wilkins saw two standing at the edge of the cooking fire, unmoving, headless. No one questioned it anymore.

On the thirteenth day, Harlow stopped sleeping.

He paced the clearing in slow loops, shirt off, skin flaking in long strips, bones showing at the edges of his collar. He no longer blinked much. One night, Clay caught him standing knee-deep in the river, whispering to the water. When asked what he was doing, Harlow only said, "It's listening now. It wants to speak."

On the seventeenth day, he followed a shape.

It appeared just past the third perimeter trap, tall and thin, not moving. Harlow stood up, rifle in hand, and walked without a word. Wilkins saw him go and didn't stop him. Clay rose to follow but sat back down before taking the first step.

Harlow never came back.

They waited a day. Then two. His prints led nowhere. The fog thickened.

By the nineteenth day, they stopped counting him among the living.

Someone said his name once.

The fog replied. Just once. His voice. Perfect.

Then nothing.

They found the cave by accident, or maybe not.

The fog had herded them like sheep for days, funneling their path through gullies and ridges without compass, without map, until they reached a slope slick with black moss that seemed to breathe when stepped on. The mouth of the cave was low and wet, weeping condensation down the sides like sweat. Inside, the air was warm. Stale. Too still. The light from Clay's torch caught shapes moving in the distance, but no one spoke of that anymore.

Manson stopped just inside the entrance.

He crouched, breathing hard, sweat pooling in the hollows of his eyes. His boots were gone. Feet red and cracked. He hadn't spoken in hours.

Then he squatted, pulled down what was left of his fatigues, and defecated onto the cave floor.

No one said anything. No one moved.

With two fingers, he began to write on the stone wall.

Long, looping shapes. Some like letters. Some like maps. Some like things seen once in a dream and never forgotten.

He hummed as he worked. Not a song. Not a tune. Just a droning rhythm that came from somewhere beneath thought.

Clay turned his head. Wilkins didn't look at all.

When Manson finished, he sat down in front of it, hands resting in his lap, the mess smeared up his forearms and under his fingernails. His face was calm.

No one read what he wrote.

They didn't ask what it meant. No one tried to clean it.

Clay took handfuls of wet clay and quietly pressed it over the symbols one by one, until the wall was hidden. Manson didn't protest. Just closed his eyes and leaned back against the damp stone.

The torchlight flickered once, low and red.

Somewhere deeper in the cave, something breathed in a pattern that didn't match their own.

Wilkins began speaking just after dawn, when the fog thinned enough to show the nearest trees and no farther. He stood at the center of the clearing, barefoot in the mud, chest bare and streaked with old ash and new blood, arms spread wide as if addressing a crowd that had stepped just out of sight. His voice rose and fell without pattern — sometimes a whisper, sometimes a shout that tore at his throat. He spoke in English, then in fragments of other sounds that bent his mouth wrong, syllables swallowed and reshaped by breath. He laughed suddenly, sharp and bright, then collapsed into sobbing that shook his ribs, pounding his chest with both fists until the skin bruised dark.

No one stopped him. Clay sat on a fallen log and listened without listening. Manson lay on his side near the cave mouth, eyes open, watching the fog drift past like slow water. Wilkins ranted for hours, accusing, pleading, confessing to figures only he could see. He begged forgiveness from something overhead, cursed something beneath his feet, promised obedience to whatever was patient enough to wait. At one point he knelt and pressed his forehead into the mud, smearing it across his face like war paint, then rose again smiling through tears.

When his voice finally broke into nothing but breath, Wilkins picked up a shovel and dug a hole. Not deep. Just wide enough for a man to sit. He climbed into it, knees pulled to his chest, hands resting on the rim like he was settling into a bath. He looked up at the fog and smiled — not wide, not mad, just content. He stayed there. He didn't ask for help. No one offered it.

Clay left the clearing sometime later, walking without direction through trees that appeared and vanished as the fog thickened and thinned. He didn't know how long he walked. Time had stopped behaving. He came upon a man sitting under a banyan tree whose roots hung like ropes into the air. The man had no skin. Muscle gleamed wet and dark, tendons shining as he breathed. He sat upright, hands folded in his lap, posture calm, as if waiting for a bus that would never arrive.

The man looked up. His eyes were intact. Clear.

"You've been dead a long time," he said, voice mild, almost friendly.

Clay nodded.

He didn't stop. He didn't ask questions. He walked on through the fog, boots sinking and lifting, leaving prints that filled in behind him almost at once.

The night arrived soft as breath and never left.

At first, they thought it was cloud cover—thick monsoon dusk stretched long—but the light never returned. Not with sunrise. Not with time. Just a blackness that sat on their shoulders, weightless and vast. Watches stopped again, not ticking down but ticking inward, every second folding into the next like cloth soaked in oil. Fire wouldn't hold. Lanterns only lit their own glass, not the air. Shapes moved in the dark, but no one turned their heads anymore.

Manson stood near the tree line, upright and still, eyes closed. He had slept that way for two days. Not leaning. Not swaying. Just standing, like a figure carved out of something heavier than flesh. His mouth twitched sometimes, as if speaking in

dreams, but no sound came. His hands hung loose at his sides. Clay checked his pulse the first night. It was there. Slow. Irregular.

Wilkins never slept.

He sat in the dirt, arms wrapped around his knees, shivering even though the air held no chill. Every few minutes he clapped, once, sharp, like he was testing the silence to see if it would clap back. It never did. After the fifth time, he whispered, “Still here,” like he wasn’t sure.

Clay kept the rifle across his lap. Unloaded. There was nothing left to shoot.

In the third night—though they had no way to measure days anymore—a voice spoke.

Not from the trees. Not from the air. From beside them. Inches from Clay’s ear. A child’s voice. Soft. Calm. Familiar.

“Not yet,” it said.

No one else moved. Manson stayed frozen. Wilkins paused, looked up, eyes wide, but said nothing. The voice didn’t come again.

Clay didn’t answer. He just sat in the dark and waited for the next word.

It never came. Only the sound of breathing—his own, maybe. Maybe not.

Into the Green

1974

There were only five of them now.

No one said it out loud. No one counted. The number announced itself in the way space opened between bodies, in how the night felt wider than before. Clay stood at the front of what was left, shoulders squared, rifle hanging loose in his hands. He didn’t speak. He hadn’t in days. When he tried, nothing came out. His mouth opened sometimes, just a little, like he was testing whether sound still lived there, then closed again. The others noticed and didn’t ask.

They moved at first light that wasn’t really light, more a thinning of darkness into green. The jungle had grown denser, or maybe they had thinned enough to notice.

Leaves brushed their faces with something like familiarity. The ground no longer resisted their steps. It gave way willingly, soft and warm, as if it had been waiting. Manson walked behind Clay, barefoot now, eyes half-lidded, breathing slow. Wilkins followed, skin tight on bone, hands stained with dirt, smiling at nothing. Two others brought up the rear, shapes more than men, moving because stopping felt worse.

Clay didn't turn back. He didn't signal. The others followed because there was nothing else left to do. The war had ended somewhere else, they knew that, in a way people know about distant weather. But here there were no flags, no orders, no exits. Just the green, thick and endless, folding open in front of them.

When they reached the edge of the deeper jungle, the kind no helicopters ever crossed, Clay paused. For a moment it looked like he might speak. His throat worked. His jaw tightened. Then he stepped forward and disappeared between the trees, swallowed without sound.

The others went after him.

The jungle closed.

The jungle thinned not gradually but all at once, like a held breath exhaled. One moment they were pushing through vines thick as arms, their shirts torn by bamboo teeth, leeches curling in their boots, and the next—light. A clearing opened around them with no transition, no warning, just the soft hush of leaf canopy giving way to a circle of pale earth.

It was not on any map.

The Vietnamese jungle around it was the kind that swallowed structures whole. Trees climbed into the sky with limbs twisted like rope, canopies layered so thick no sun ever truly touched the forest floor. Giant ferns unfurled like tongues. The air hung with the sweetness of decay, the musk of wet rot, and the sharp green bite of things always growing. Everything pulsed. Even the stones felt alive, slick with moss that shimmered in low light like fish scales. Roots bulged from the ground in serpentine coils, slick and veined, as if the land itself refused to stay flat. Orchids bloomed in colors too bruised to name, clinging to the trunks of ironwood trees with desperate fingers.

And in the center of this—quiet as a grave—rested a Huey.

Rusted, canted to one side like it had given up trying to lift itself long ago. The rotors hung low, draped in vines like a skeleton wearing its burial clothes. Moss clung to the

tail. Lichen had bloomed across the fuselage in patches, swallowing the faded U.S. ARMY lettering until only ghosts of the letters remained. The side door hung open, jagged and bent inward like something had exited fast. No birds perched on it. No insects crawled inside. It was as still as stone, forgotten by both man and time.

Clay stepped into the clearing first.

He paused, not for reverence but recognition—like he'd seen it before, long ago, in a photo buried under his bunk. Behind him, Manson let out a slow breath through his nose. Wilkins pressed his hand to a tree, fingers trailing the bark as if greeting something familiar. The two shadows behind them said nothing.

The jungle didn't close this time. It watched. And waited.

Beyond the clearing, past the bones of the Huey and the ring of tree roots grown like fingers around its skids, the jungle opened again—not wider, just stranger. Clay stepped first, boot heel sinking in the spongy floor, then lifting onto something smooth. He froze. Looked down.

A road.

Perfectly paved.

Black asphalt, unmarred by weather or time, flat as a memory never tested. No cracks. No vines. Not even dust. It cut through the jungle in a line too clean for Vietnam, or for any war that had ever passed through. No mile markers. No paint. Just a dark ribbon laid across a country that had never known permanence.

It didn't lead in either direction.

When they turned to trace it with their eyes, there was no start point. No sign of construction. No debris, no tools, no machinery. It was simply there. And it did not end—just bled into fog, curling behind trees that leaned back, as if reluctant to grow too near it.

No one said a word. Clay started walking. The others followed without question.

Manson carried nothing now. His hands swung free at his sides, fingers blackened from something not mud. Wilkins walked beside Clay, whispering to himself in a language no one recognized, one hand pressed to his chest, the other trailing along the edge of the road like he was feeling for heat.

The footsteps made no sound. Even the birds had gone.

They moved like sleepwalkers through a dream too detailed to be safe. The air changed. Grew thin. The sky above had gone a pale blue-white, like paint mixed with milk and left too long in the sun. Trees lined the sides of the road, but their leaves didn't rustle. The wind never touched them.

They walked for an hour. Maybe more. They never spoke. Not because they were silent—but because the road made speech unnecessary. Or impossible.

It led nowhere. They followed anyway. It didn't begin with a word, or a look.

The road ran straight and narrow beneath them, but something shifted—not ahead, not around, but inside. Manson was the first. He slowed, breathing deep, eyes half-lidded as if catching a scent no one else could smell. He stepped off the pavement and into the undergrowth, careful, barefoot, his boots abandoned neatly on the shoulder, laces still tied.

No one called to him. No one asked where he was going.

He moved into the jungle like he'd always belonged to it, the vines parting gently, not resisting, as if the earth had opened a vein just for him.

Minutes later, Wilkins followed.

He stopped walking, knelt beside the road, and removed his boots with the care of a man preparing for prayer. One sock was soaked in old blood. He left it on the asphalt. The other he tucked into his boot before placing them side by side like they might still be needed by someone else.

Then he stood and walked into the trees, humming something faint, each note swallowed almost immediately by green silence.

Now only Clay remained.

He stood in the center of the road, boots still on, rifle in hand but no longer loaded. The silence was vast, but not empty. The trees leaned inward. The vines drooped lower. Light filtered differently here—green and gold, like the last breath of summer before the rot.

He crouched.

Untied his boots.

Left them standing where the blacktop ended in a smear of dirt.

Then he walked, slow and barefoot, into the jungle, not toward anything, not away from anything, just into it. The trees closed, as if they had always been waiting to welcome him home.

The mud took him slow.

Up to the shins first, warm and thick, soft as old breath. It didn't pull like quicksand. It held. Clay knelt in it without resistance, knees sinking with a wet sigh, hands resting on his thighs, fingers stained dark from years of rot, from blood both his and not his. He was alone now. The jungle moved around him — not with wind, but with presence. Leaves rustled without air. Birds chirped without mouths. Everything lived and watched and waited.

The notebook was damp at the corners.

It had survived fire, rain, two tunnel collapses, and the slow acid of sweat. Pages curled like dead skin. The cover had lost its stiffness long ago. He opened it with care, thumb tracing the spine. Inside, names had faded. Maps bled together. Dates made no sense anymore. Stories crumbled into smudges.

Only one page remained clean.

The last.

Blank.

He looked at it for a long time. Let the white of it soak into him, like sun on a face long kept in shadow. Then he folded the book shut, pressing it between both palms as if in prayer. No words came. None were needed.

Clay stood.

The green opened ahead — not a path, not a clearing, just space. Dense with growth, thick with life that pulsed and breathed with no name. The kind of jungle no map ever touched. He walked into it without looking back.

Branches curled down to receive him.

Leaves parted.

And then the green swallowed itself whole.

No one ever saw them again.